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# INFINITE STRATOS

YUMIZURU Izuru  
Illustration: CHOCO



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*Here we go! To the sea!*



*"Pre-spotted her, Ichika!"*

*".....!"*

*"I'm speeding up!"*

*"Contact in ten seconds. Focus, Ichika!"*

*"Got it!"*



Infinite Stratos 3: Visualization of Stories

# UCHIGANE

A mass-produced Japanese IS which holds the second-place share of the global market. Its lack of firepower makes it unsuitable for solo missions; however, it boasts the strongest defense of all second-generation IS, with its ability to 'repair its shields before they could be punched through' allowing for exceptional combat endurance and versatility as a support unit. Its ease of piloting and maintenance have lead to it being retained in use around the world in trainer and testbed configurations. The Uchigane is also the most numerous of the trainers available at IS Academy.

The textile belts which wrap around its armor, reminiscent of a samurai's, help to absorb the strains placed upon it, further increasing its defensive capabilities. Its shoulder-mounted plating and armored skirt allow it to provide cover for its squadmates in a variety of situations.

Its Japanese-developed OS is exceptionally flexible and versatile, and its package selection is the greatest among all IS. The extended-range sniping package "Gekitetsu," or "firing hammer," is noteworthy for holding a world record in accuracy at range.



The Anatomy of Infinite Stratos

Japanese Name:  
Flintsteel  
Unit Code: Type 61,  
Enhanced Armor  
Generation: Second  
Country: Japan

Classification: Melee-Range Versatile IS  
Equipment: "Aoi" ("Hollyhock"), Melee Blade  
"Homurabi" ("The Blaze"), Assault Rifle  
Armor: Sliding Composite Layered Armor  
Features: Rapid Shield Repair



A “fourth-generation” IS created by Shinonono Tabane. Painted a deep crimson from head to toe, the application of gold maki-e to its arms and legs makes it truly “dazzling.”

The pair of large binders which stretch out like flower petals from its back, along with its arms and legs, are “variable-sweep armor” capable of radical transformation.

This variable-sweep armor is also equipped with active energy blasters, allowing it to function as shielding, secondary weaponry, or even additional thrusters. When fully extended, energy blades can be thrust or even launched forth from within, depending on output power.

Japanese Name:  
Crimson Camellia  
Unit Code: XX-02  
Generation: Fourth  
Country: Japan

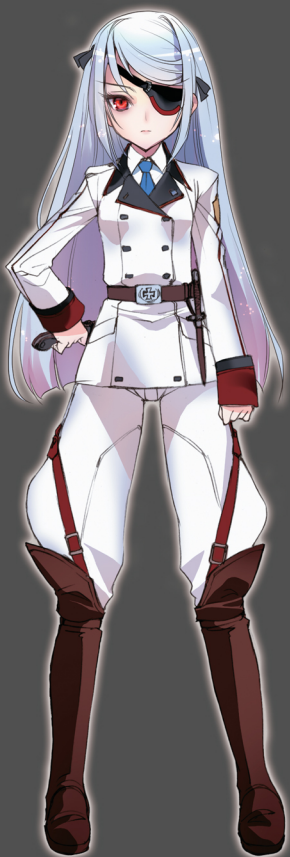
Classification: All-Purpose IS  
Equipment: Ranged-Capable Melee Blades,  
“Karaware” (Skyrender”) and “Amazuki” (“Moonlit Rain”)  
Armor: Nanocolloid Armor  
Features: Variable-Sweep Armor  
Energy Multiplier, “Kenran Butou” (“Dazzling Dance”)



Charlotte DUNOIS Right



Left Laura BODEWIG





### **Orimura Ichika**

The only male in the world who can pilot an IS. His personal IS is “Byakushiki.”



### **Shinonono Houki**

Ichika’s childhood friend.  
Has no personal IS.



### **Cecilia Alcott**

The British National Cadet.  
Her personal IS is “Blue Tears.”



### **Huang Lingyin**

The Chinese National Cadet.  
Her personal IS is “Shenlong.”



### **Charles Dunois**

The French National Cadet.  
Her personal IS is “Rafale Revive Custom II.”



### **Laura Bodewig**

The German National Cadet.  
Her personal IS is “Schwarzer Regen.”



**Chapter I**

*A Maiden's Heart is a Rainmaker*

**Chapter II**

*Ocean, at Eleven*

**Chapter III**

*The Thin Red Line*

**Chapter IV**

*Dressy White*

**Epilogue**

*Your Name Is*





# Chapter I: A Maiden's Heart is a Rainmaker

"Sorry to bother you about it."

"Oh, no problem."

Ichika and Charlotte walked the halls of the school after class let out, bathed in the vermillion rays of the sunset. Each carried a bundle of printouts detailing their upcoming class trip, later that month, to the seashore campus.

"Are you sure you should, though? Weren't you supposed to go into town with Cecilia today?"

"Nah, it's fine. You gave me an excuse not to get dragged along."

"Eh?"

"Well, y'know. Even if it's running deliveries, I'd rather spend the time with you." Ichika's cheeks burned faintly as he spoke. Their red tinge was from more than just the setting sun.

"Ichika..."

"Charlotte..."

In the empty hallway, their eyes reflected only each other. They needed no words. Two shadows, enveloped in orange, moved closer, then overlapped...

"Wha—" She shook her head, trying to gather her senses.

The place: her own room in the first-year dorms at IS Academy. The time: half past six in the morning.

"....." Charlotte sat for a moment in confusion, blinking once, then again, before grasping the situation. "It was a dream..."

She let loose a deep, deep sigh, from seemingly 20,000 leagues down in her soul. *If I only could have had ten more seconds...* She sorrowfully cast her mind to the lingering memories. Even as the details faded, she only wanted to cling harder to what remained. Like rewatching a favorite video, she replayed the scene in her head.

"....." Her cheeks lit up red. As her consciousness returned, her dream seemed more and more embarrassing. *In the hall? Seriously, me?* Still, it was a dream in both senses of the word. She held a hand to her chest, feeling her heart pound.

*What am I thinking...* After last month's tournament, Charles Dunois—now revealed as Charlotte Dunois—moved to a room separate from Ichika's. Still, a couple times a week, she awoke from similar dreams, hoping to cast her gaze over and lock eyes with Ichika

in the other bed.

“Huh?” The other bed was empty. Not just empty, but unused.

“Ah well.” What mattered to her more was what happened next in the dream. If she fell back right away, perhaps it would continue. Clutching onto that faint hope, Charlotte closed her eyes again. *If it's just a dream, I wouldn't mind it being a bit dirtier—*

“What am I thinking...” Charlotte buried her head under her blanket to hide her blush, and tried to stop her pulse racing.



*Chirp, chirp...*

“Mm...”

The sun beat down from outside my window as if demanding to be let inside. Sparrows sang, encouraging me to wake up. *Just a little bit longer...* Nothing feels better than hitting ‘snooze.’ There was no way anyone on earth didn’t enjoy it. Well, maybe there could be.

As I moved my hand, I felt something soft. *Huh...?* I moved it again and was met with the same soft sensation. *What is this feeling? I don't remember having something smooth and soft like this in my bed.* Whatever it was, my curiosity wasn’t enough to beat out my desire for a satisfying snooze. *Ahh, this is great.* I brushed by the soft object once more.

“Mm...”

*Wait. That voice isn't mine. And it doesn't seem to be male—not that I want it to be.* A thought raced through the back of my mind. The light bulb in my head turned on with an audible click. I tore the blankets off with a whoosh. And under them was...

“L-Laura?!” The German National Cadet, Laura Bodewig.

The day she’d arrived last month, she declared war. After that, a lot happened, and... things transpired even further from there. But, that wasn’t the problem right now. The problem right now was that she wasn’t wearing a single thing. She was completely naked. The only things on her body were the patch over her left eye, and her dormant IS—a black garter around her left thigh. Her long silver hair covered her hips.



“Mmm... What? Is it morning already?”

“Cover up, you idiot!”

“That’s a funny thing to say. Why should a married couple have anything to hide?”

“That may be true, but... Wait, that doesn’t even apply here! Put some clothes on!” Ignoring my confusion, Laura lazily rubbed her eye and stood up with her usual expression. Incredible... she turned down a snooze. She must be inhuman. *This isn’t the kind of situation to be even thinking about that sort of thing, though.* As I worked over the situation in my mind, Laura opened her mouth first.

“I’d heard this was how one normally woke people up in Japan. Especially one’s betrothed.”

“Who gave you that crazy idea?”

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“You woke up.”

“Well, of course I did...” The only people alive that wouldn’t wake were the dead, or the brain dead. Meaning, no one, since neither of those were alive.

No answer. Seems to be a corpse.

Really, if you were talking to a corpse, there was something wrong with you to begin with. The corpse needed a grave, and you needed medical help.

“It’s still a while before we can get breakfast, though.” As she wrapped herself in a sheet, her hair fell from its knot. Struck by the rays of the sun, it glimmered like silver. I had to admit it was beautiful.

*Still, I’m getting tired of this. She’s been pulling this kind of thing since the tournament last month...* At this point, it was unusual when she didn’t sit down next to me in the cafeteria, and she’d walked in on me in the bath—while I was changing into my IS suit one time, too. Yeah... if I didn’t deal with this now it would just keep escalating.

“.....” Ugh, was there some kind of way to make her back off a bit?

“What? Don’t stare at me like that. It’s embarrassing.” A liar stood before me. Yet the way her cheeks flushed and her gaze wavered when she lied was a little... no, a lot cute. *Dammit! Dammit, dammit, dammit— Wait, I have an idea!*

“Laura.”

“What?”

“I prefer modest women.”

“Oh, really?” Her eye widened, as if slightly shocked. Then she nodded twice, as if digesting what I’d said.

Oh, it worked! Good job, me. “Here’s your reward.” Why, thank you! I am my noble master.

“That’s just your taste, though?”

“Eh?”

“I’m myself.” An eye steeled with determination drilled into me. The hand held over her chest as if pointing where her heart was served only to reinforce it.

“.....” Wow. How incredibly self-confident... If I were a girl, I’d have fallen for her right there. Just kidding.

“Didn’t you say—” Eh? What did I say? Dammit, I’d already forgotten. “You told me I could do whatever I wanted. No fair changing your mind.”

Well, now that I thought of it, I probably did say that, but c’mon. I wasn’t really prepared for it to go this far. Besides, all the confidence she’d had fell away, and her almost pleading look up at me was a bit too appealing. This was that gap moe thing, wasn’t it? Not that I really knew much about that. It made even the hand pointing at her chest seem more like an effort to cover up.

“You seem quite excited about this, for someone who was telling me to cover up.”

“Wha— No, wait, no, it’s not like that!”

“Then, would you like to see? You’re certainly a morning would, not a wouldn’t.”

“Argh! Just hold on a minute!” As Laura began to part the sheets, I panicked. I tried to pull them back over her but she flipped me over onto the bed with a loud thunk. The time was shortly after six in the morning. *I’m sorry, neighbors to the side, above, and below.*

“Damn you!”

Somehow I’d managed to get the upper hand for a second against Laura as she struggled to keep a hold of the sheets. At least I’d thought so, but somehow being on top just made it easier for her to sweep my legs out from under me. Ugh, she was using her military training. There was no way I could deal with that. Flipped over, I slid down on to the floor headfirst. My neck bent at a 90-degree angle. Ouch.

“You need more practice with your technique.” Man, she sounded exactly like Chifuyu. Seems like she’d learned well—she even had the cold gaze down pat. “But, um... If you want more practice with your technique, if you know what I mean, I can’t say I’d be opposed to helping out.”

Huh? Why were her cheeks so red? What was ‘technique’ even supposed to—oh.

“You idiot! Women aren’t supposed to say things like that!”

“Oh? Did you want to say it yourself? Go right ahead.”

“That’s not what my problem is! Don’t you have any contrition



about what you did to me last month?!”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, um... W-When... When you kissed me...” Ugh. Just saying it made the memories come flooding back, and not just my face but my whole body heated up. I couldn’t bear to remember the hell which unfolded afterward. To sum it up very briefly: last month, Laura had stolen a kiss from me. Not just a kiss, but... “That was my first...”

It sounds lame, I know, but it’s true. That sudden encounter was my first kiss. It was so shocking that I don’t even remember what it tasted like. All right, who in back said “probably like lemons?”

“Really.”

“Really?” That blunt reply just pissed me off again, but she continued to speak as I tried to lash out.

“It was my first kiss, too. Um... I’m a little bit glad.”

Her cheeks flushed red as she spoke, and despite myself, I was at a loss for words. *Think about it, self. Right in front of you is a cute (very cute, if we’re just talking looks) girl, blushing.* Were you going to argue with her? There was no real man on earth that would do that. Probably.

“.....”

“.....”

Um... What was with this silence? Our shared awkwardness was just driving us to think more about each other. Time to change the subject.

“Wha—” As I started to rise, Laura pressed me back down. Her reaction was smooth and swift, and left me wondering where her slender arms got so much strength.

“Ugh, I just don’t know what to do about you. I want to know! Why are you so good at stirring up women’s passions?!”

W-What was she talking about? For me, this was a race against time. Laura, her face reddened by the rays of the rising sun, was already pushing me down toward the bed.



Behind the dorm, there was an empty space often used for impromptu get-togethers. There, every day, Houki practiced with live steel.

“Phew...” Her morning practice swings completed, she pulled a towel from her bag to dry her sweat. It glimmered, reflecting the morning sun, like a dusting of jewels. Her healthy skin was enveloped by a white gi and indigo hakama. She even wore tabi and sandals on her feet.

To be quite serious for a moment, footwork was absolutely vital to fencing. The combination of tabi and sandals made it well-suited for

toe tip stomps, braces, and tensings so that you could consider it 'designed for combat.' As a sport, kendo may be conducted barefoot for no obstruction at all, but this was surely the closest footwear to it. However, with everything going on, she'd barely ever made it to kendo club. Still, though, she made sure to keep practicing and not lose her edge.

*It's already July...* Lately, the morning sun had burned down fiercely. It felt as if a haze of heat filled the air. Exercising felt good, but being covered in sweat didn't. *I should take a shower.* Her roommate was probably still sound asleep, dreaming. Even though it was a longer walk, Houki set out for the clubroom showers, not wanting to wake her up. *July. It's July.* Ichika had better not have forgotten. Early summer held a special meaning for Houki.

"You're up early again today. Good morning."

"Good morning." The teacher in charge of the clubrooms usually opened them early for morning practice.

Ms. Sakakibara, turning 29 this year, was prim and polite, and certainly wasn't a bad-looking individual. Yet, she had no luck with men. She kept falling for guys who even other guys say they "couldn't really get along with." A few times a year she could be spotted barcrawling after getting dumped. This was the last year of her 20s, though. Lately, her parents had been trying to set her up with men from out in the country, but no matter how many first dates she went on, her reaction was always the same.

"Well, he's nice. But he's not really my type." Yeah, that was it. She didn't want a safe, quiet life. That's why she was attracted to strange men. She, herself, had begun to realize that she needed passion in her life. She didn't want to marry someone just to be done with it. That was Sakakibara Natsuki in a nutshell.

"I'm taking a shower."

"No rush. Remember to make sure you turn the water off when you're done."

"Okay." Ms. Sakakibara grinned at Houki's energetic response. She was beautiful. But, as mentioned...

*Hmm.* Houki entered the locker room attached to the showers. As usual, there was no one there but herself. A given, with how early it was. Even the morning practice rush wouldn't start for another thirty minutes. The truth of the matter was, Houki deliberately made sure to avoid that rush. The reason was...

"....." As Houki let her gi slide off, her breasts swayed, barely held in by her bra. Her breasts, far fuller than those of most girls her age, attracted almost as much attention from other girls as from boys. When she'd changed with other students doing morning practice before, the entire locker room stared directly at them. A line of girls

had trailed her from the locker room to the shower, as if she were the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Even with individual shower stalls, she couldn't relax feeling their eyes on her. And then, it got even worse. One girl whispered "watermelons," and as if they were hypnotized, the entire rest of the room started listing round fruits. Burning bright red from embarrassment and anger, Houki had fled the showers.

*Ugh, they've gotten even bigger...* Big breasts weren't all they were cracked up to be, at least not for Houki. They made her back hurt. They kept getting in the way. It was hard to find bras that fit, and then it was hard to find blouses that fit. They ended up inescapably drawing everyone's attention.

*I wish I could do something about them...* Houki let out a sigh. Yet if she complained about it to Ling, she'd be chased to the ends of the earth. It was terrifying. Feminine pride was higher than Everest and deeper than the Mariana Trench, yet somehow more delicate than the traditional novelties of Ohgiya in Kyoto. It was also a hazardous material—one of the most hazardous. "Warning - Highly Explosive." The strictest handling was necessary.

*On the other hand. If Ichika likes them big, I guess it's okay...* She thought back to last month, when she had taken Ichika's arm to compete with Cecilia. It was far bolder than anything she'd normally do, but the expression on Ichika's face as he noticed her as a woman had overjoyed her. Competing with Cecilia or not, the realization that her breasts were pressing into Ichika's arm had been intensely embarrassing. But... *If it made him notice me...* That was enough to make it all worth it. No matter how well-trained she was with a blade, she was still a blossoming teenage girl. She couldn't help but be hung up on her crush. And then there was this month's seashore trip, the timing was perfect.

The educational point of the trip was to let students use IS over a wide-ranging area, but this was IS Academy, and 99% of those students were girls. So of course they'd take that into consideration. The first day was entirely unstructured—meaning, she'd be able to swim and play as much as she liked. There weren't even any inconvenient restrictions, like having to wear school swimsuits! It would be absolute freedom. *It's the best chance I'll ever have!* As the only boy there, Ichika would be the center of an intense battle, but Houki had a trick up her sleeve.

"I've got it! First step, have him go shopping with me this weekend!" Houki didn't even notice her own fists clenching as her voice echoed through the empty showers.



*All right.* She'd showered off the sweat, she'd dried her wet hair,

she'd put on the freshly-cleaned summer uniform she had laid out, she'd triple-checked her hair, and she'd cleared her throat five times, just to be sure. Only after that did Houki knock on Ichika's door.

**Knock, knock.**

"A-Are you there, Ichika? I thought it'd be nice to get breakfast together, we haven't in a while." No answer. "Ichika? Are you still asleep? If you don't get up, you'll miss breakfast."

Still no answer. Houki, a little bit frustrated, grabbed the doorknob. **Click.** *Huh? He didn't have it locked? That boy is just too trusting.*

"Ichika, I'm coming in. Are you up and dres— Guh."

"Huh?"

**Snaf.** Houki's expression, her movement, her entire body froze. As she opened the door and stepped into the room, she discovered a naked Laura, lying on top of Ichika and moving in for a kiss. And for some reason, he wasn't showing any signs of resistance. That was all Houki needed to explode in rage.

"Ichika! Wh-What are you doing, you—" Houki's blade rang as it leapt from its sheath in a breath; this was the result of her daily training. But for Ichika, on the receiving end, it was terrifying.

"W-Wait! Houki! This isn't what it looks like!"

"Then what is it?! Ugh, stand still and let me cut you!"

"Agh! Knock it off, you moron!"

"Who are you calling a moron, you idiot?!" Houki, clearly disinclined to listen, raised her katana over her head, preparing to cut through both mount and rider. Its dull gleam was unmistakably that of live steel, and if it found its mark there would be nothing the doctors could do. "This is your punishment!"

The blade whistled through the air, and Ichika sweated like a condemned man. Yet, it stopped a split-second before making contact. That is, it was stopped.

"I can't have you killing my wife."

"Ugh, damn you!" Laura had materialized only the right arm of her IS armor. Using its AIC, she'd stopped Houki's blade dead. Houki's anger only grew as an unseen force stopped her every effort.

As an aside, Ichika was Laura's bride. Normally, he'd be her groom, but someone had told Laura that "Japan has a custom of, when taken with a fancy for someone, declaring you'd make them your bride." Ichika swore to himself that if he ever found who gave her that idea, he'd strangle them.

"Phew, that was close... Huh? Laura, you took your eyepatch off?" Ichika, finally noticing Laura's golden right eye, was a bit surprised. The color-changed eye was a focus of Laura's resentment for her past—that was why she fought, and lost, last month's tournament with it

covered. Embedded with special nanomachines which enhance the function of her IS hypersensor, it raised her visual acuity. Even without her IS deployed, it gave her accurate aim at targets up to two kilometers away.

“I didn’t like that eye very much before, but I think I do now.”

“I see. That’s good.” Ichika nodded in encouragement, happy that she’d become more positive about her own body. Seeing his expression, Laura’s face glowed a faint pink.

“It’s because you think it’s pretty.” Between blushing Laura, afraid to make eye contact and Ichika, whose pulse must be pounding, Houki was the only one who wasn’t enjoying herself.

“Tch...”

“Tch?”

“CHESTOOOOOOO!” Houki’s shout and pure animal rage was enough to force its way through Laura’s AIC. The blade began to fall again.

“Gwah!” With a resounding thump, the blankets and the bed itself were sliced clean in two. Only 15, and yet still such talent with a blade. A master swordsman who saw this would surely have tried to recruit her to his school.

“Ichika! Give up and die!”

“What are you even talking about?!”

“How impolite of you to try to lay a hand on someone else’s bride!”

Three lines of thought, never to cross. The chaos continued until Ms. Yamada, their RA, came running to find out what the commotion was.



A different time, a different scene. I was in the dining hall in the first-year dorms. Given escape from that hell, I was settling down to a late breakfast. Next to me was Laura; across from me was Houki. I’d chosen a menu of natto and grilled fish. Laura had bread, corn chowder, and chicken salad. Houki had a boiled spinach salad with stewed fish. Mmm, each looked great. As I stirred my natto, I glanced around.

“Want some?” Laura had noticed my gaze, and asked if I wanted to share some of her food before gently holding a slice of bread between her teeth. Hm? Why did she put it in her— Wait, whoa!

“Mmm... What’s wrong? Go ahead.”

“You idiot! There’s no way he could eat like that! It’s basically just kissing—” Houki ran out of words and banged the table with her fist. “You should at least calm down at breakfast.”

Laura’s mouth twitched into a terrifying grin.

“Hmm... And was that jealousy I heard?”

“What?!”

“You envy me because you can’t do this, don’t you.”

“Wh-What do you mean, can’t— Ichika!” Houki gargled miso soup in her mouth as she turned toward me. I didn’t want it to be ‘feeding by mouth,’ but it seemed like she was going to insist. Um, when was I going to get to eat my own breakfast?

“...! .....!” Hurry up, she seemed to prompt. Her eyes spoke as loudly as her mouth could have. I’d rather they hadn’t spoken with the steely glare of a sniper ace, though.

“Oh, by the way, Ichika told me something this morning.” Laura paused for a bite of chicken salad. After swallowing, she continued. “He says he prefers modest women.”

“.....!!!” Houki reacted to Laura’s nonchalance with a start, like a dove hit by a peashooter. Swallowing the miso soup in her mouth, she settled back in her chair. Afterward, she continued eating breakfast with a serene expression. The term ‘modest’ must have had an impact, as even her bites of rice were smaller than usual.

Looking at Houki like this, she is quite pretty. Her daily training had left her with a firm posture, and not an ounce of excess fat on her arms or legs. The way she held her chopsticks was especially beautiful, with a grace like that of a concert pianist.

“Whoa! I’m gonna be late!” An unexpected voice broke the silence. Its source rushed into the dining hall, grabbing the closest meal tray she could find.

“Hey, Charlotte.”

“Oh, Ichika. Good morning.”

I had another open seat next to me, so I waved her over. It was rare for Charlotte to be this late to breakfast. Her flustered state made it obvious. It was true, though. If she didn’t rush through her meal, she would be late.

“What’s up? You’re usually always on time. Did you oversleep?”

“Yeah, I, uh, did.”

“Wow, even you oversleep?”

“Well, uh... More, I fell back asleep.” Maybe because she was trying to cram down a meal, Charlotte had a harder time answering clearly than usual. But was it just my imagination, or was she shying away from me?

“Charlotte.”

“Mm?”

“Are you trying to avoid me?”

“O-Of course not! Why would I do that?” Her words said one thing, but I could definitely tell she was on guard. Up until last month, we’d roomed together for nearly a month, so I could definitely sense

when she was trying to change the subject. *It'd just make her feel worse if I pressed her on it, so I'll back off. Besides...*

I stared closely at Charlotte, who was eating faster than usual. My one-on-one training on how to use chopsticks had clearly paid off. Why, she could pick the bones out of grilled fish before she'd even had breakfast! Well, when she was having breakfast.

"I-Ichika? You keep looking at me, is something wrong? Do I have bed head?"

"Nah. It's just an interesting change of pace to see you in girl's clothes after you were in guy's clothes all last month."

"I-Interesting?"

"Yeah. I think you look cute in them."

"But I was in guy's clothes in the dream..." Charlotte, apparently not very used to compliments, glowed red.

"Hm? What dream?"

"Oh, it's nothing! Nothing at all!" She waved it off and turned back to her meal. As for myself, having finished with my meal, perhaps it was time for a tea—

"Oww!" Suddenly, my foot was stomped on and my cheek was pinched.

"For someone who prefers modest women, you're quite the playboy. Remember, you're my bride."

"You should compliment me, too."

Said Laura and Houki, in that order. This was hell. Did I have to spam the B button to escape? I'd really prefer not to be boiled alive.

"Um..." *Think of something, self. All right, that's a good idea.* "You'd both be beautiful if you calmed down."

**Smash!** A double-foot stomp. That positively ached.

"DON'T TREAT ME LIKE HER!" came in stereo. Wow, terrifying. Each of them were fixated on me with a deadly glare. What was this all about... Did they hate to be compared to each other that much? Why couldn't they both just get along?

**Ding-dong.** Listen, the bell has started ringing already, and it's because you two can't deal with each other. *Wait... The bell?*

"Wah! Hurry up, the bell is ringing!"

Wait, what? I was the only one standing up from the table. Houki, Laura, and even Charlotte were already out the door in a mad dash. Dammit, wait for me! "Don't leave me behind! Today's Chifuyu—er, Ms. Orimura's turn to do homeroom!"

Being late would be suicide.

"I don't want to die."

"Same."

"Sorry, Ichika."

Grr. So it was like that, huh?! If we were going to hang, wouldn't



it better to hang together?! I'd have answered 'no' in an instant if the shoe was on the other foot. It was best to keep to a low-sodium, low-martyrdom diet. Just as the thought raced through my head, I made it to the lobby. It sucked having to change from slippers into shoes every time we left, and vice-versa. Hm, the girls were already gone.

"Hey, Ichika." Wait, no. Someone gripped my hand as soon as I'd gotten my slippers on. And who was it but Charlotte? She waited for me. What a great person! She was willing to die beside me! "Ichika, let's fly."

"Huh?" I'd no sooner asked than a halo of light spread from Charlotte's back and condensed down. Charlotte had materialized just part of her Rafale Revive Custom II—only her leg thrusters and back wings were there. "Wha—"

She pulled me along with a tight grip. The first period bell was about to ring, and the halls were empty. Using the IS's flight capability, we leapt up the stairs in the blink of an eye. But, um... She probably shouldn't fly in a miniskirt. Everyone could see her cute aqua blue panties.

"Made it!"

"Well done."

Really? The bell hadn't even rung and the demon teacher was already there waiting for us. Class 1-A instructor Orimura Chifuyu. My sister, and a former IS world champion. Incidentally, not just a champion, but the first champion ever, and the best scorer on melee combat to boot. Even unarmed, she was as fierce as a demon. I snuck a quick glance over at Charlotte's face. It was the first time I'd seen it pale.

"This is an educational institution established to develop IS pilots. For that reason, it's subject to no national authority, and operates completely apart from outside influence. But—" **Smack!** Her attendance clipboard rang as loud as ever. "Unapproved deployment of IS indoors is forbidden. Understood?"

"Understood... Sorry..." The classmates were stunned into silence at overachieving Charlotte having broken a rule. Oh, and Houki and Laura had snuck into the classroom and to their seats while Chifuyu was raging at Charlotte and I. Guess I shouldn't be surprised that they didn't bother to help.

"Dunois. Orimura. Stay after class and clean. Next time, you'll be writing apologies from in-school suspension."

"Yes, ma'am..." Drained of energy, we slunk to our seats. There were no upsides to ruining a demon's morning.

**Ding-dong.** The bell, cheerily immersed in its own little world, rang for homeroom.

"Today is standard instruction. You may be at IS Academy, but

you're still high schoolers. I'd better not see any failing grades."

We didn't have much class time for it, but of course IS Academy covered all the standard subjects, too. Even if there weren't midterms, we did have finals. A failing grade would get me sent to summer school. That, of all things, I wanted to avoid.

"Also, remember that the field trip is next week. Be sure not to forget anything. You'll be spending three days away from school. Be sure not to let the freedom distract you too much."

Ah, right. At the beginning of July was our field trip—our seashore trip. Out of the three days, the first was completely free-form. Since it was at the sea, these teen girls were sure to go wild. They'd been hyping themselves up since last week.

Meanwhile, I didn't even really want to go buy swimming trunks. Then again, when I told Cecilia and Rin that, they kept up a machine-gun hail of complaints until I finally broke down and said I would. Hmm, guess I'll have to get that out of the way this weekend. It's been a long time since I've swam in the sea. I'm looking forward to it a little.

"That concludes homeroom. Stay focused today, and study well."

"Ms. Orimura? Is Ms. Yamada out sick today?" Takatsuki Shizune, one of the more observant students in class, had raised her hand and asked a question. I'd been a bit curious as well, but I'd just assumed she'd slept in.

"Ms. Yamada has taken the day to inspect the site of the field trip, so I'm handling her job for today."

"Wait, Yamster got to go to the beach early? Lucky!"

"No fair! She should have at least taken me along!"

"She's probably swimming right now. I know she is."

As expected of teenage girls, give them something to talk about and they could go on forever. Chifuyu continued to speak, with an annoyed look on her face.

"Don't gossip like that. It's annoying. Ms. Yamada is doing her job, not playing around."

The class echoed with what seemed like a single "Okay." Always such impressive teamwork.



After class, Charlotte and I cleaned the classroom together, illuminated by the setting sun. There were no other students—IS Academy didn't normally have students clean. Dedicated janitorial staff kept the place sparkling from floor to ceiling. It seems like our temporary guardians had insisted that, rather than cleaning, our time was better spent practicing with IS. So cleaning the classrooms was reserved as a light punishment, was what we were supposed to be

feeling, but...

"Hmm, this is kind of fun."

"Eh?"

"It really is. Cleaning is. Especially when it's the classroom we're in every day."

"Really? You're so silly, Ichika." Eh? Really? I thought Charlotte would agree. I was a little bit shocked. Still, not really caring for it but helping out anyway was definitely a very Charlotte thing to do.

"Oomph."

"Don't push yourself too hard. I'll move the desks." But, uh. It was Kishizato's desk, packed completely full of papers. She called it her "full armor desk" herself, which, ummmmm.

"Nah, I'm fine. I have my own IS, right? I should at least be as strong as everyone else." As Charlotte spoke, she lost her footing from the weight. I immediately leapt to support her.

"Be careful! C'mon, you don't want to get yourself hurt. Let me move it."

"Okay... Thanks." I'd held her up from behind, so it was almost like I was embracing her. Her gaze began to waver. She was probably having a hard time dealing with a guy holding her.

"Sorry. I'll let go."

"Ah..." Huh? Somehow, her voice echoed with regret. Why? "I... I don't mind..."

"Eh?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Huh? Okay."

Charlotte's been acting strange all day, ever since first thing in the morning.



*Wow, my heart's beating so fast... I look okay, right? I'm not making any weird faces?* Even though the punishment of cleaning the classroom wasn't what she wished would bring them together, the pounding in Charlotte's chest was growing louder and louder. The orange rays of sunset illuminating the classroom mixed with her memories of that morning's dream, and her ears burned bright red. The heat from her cheeks was almost painful, and there was no trace of the usually cool and collected girl who shared the same skin. *What do I do... I should say something, right? But I have no idea what to talk about...*

"Hey, by the way."

"Yweah?!"

The surprise of the unexpected prompt from Ichika was enough to make Charlotte's voice betray her. Realizing how strange she sounded,

she pressed a hand to her mouth as soon as the sound left her lips.

“What’s wrong? You sound funny.”

“Oh, it’s nothing! Nothing at all, okay? I was just thinking about something.”

“Mmhm.”

Ichika lifted a desk, any suspicion seemingly abated. As soon as they were all put back, the two would be done cleaning, Charlotte wistfully realized.

“You know, I’ve been wondering something since last month, and I thought this would be a good time to ask.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Well, you said to call you Charlotte when we were alone together, right? I thought that meant you were going to keep being a boy, but the next morning you were a girl. Did something come up after that?”

“Er, well, uh...” For Charlotte, a bit conflicted herself, responding was painful. Even if she would have freely answered any other day, today, she was nothing but mumbles.

“Oh, uh. If you don’t want to tell me you don’t have to. I was just curious.”

“You were curious?”

“Well, of course I was.”

“I... I guess.” Charlotte mumbled, looking for something more to say. She looked back and forth between Ichika and the windows over and over, before finally working up the courage to speak. Charlotte, blushing intensely, looked straight at Ichika as she continued to speak.

“Well, I wanted to be seen as a girl— I wanted you to look at me as a girl. But it would be weird to only be one when we were alone together. Like I was running away from something. So... It’s kinda your fault?”

“Oh, really? Sorry.”

“It’s not something you have to apologize for...” Charlotte flounced toward the window. Even in the orange glow of sunset, her blush was visible.

“But, you know. I do look at you as a girl.”

“Eh? But—” The unexpected response sent Charlotte’s heart flutter—but her young passions flowed around, not over, the granite blockhead Orimura Ichika.

“I mean, you’re not a guy.”

A cawing crow flew behind Charlotte. Well, it didn’t, but its call pierced the awkward silence. *Ugh... Ichika... Ichika, you...* By the time Charlotte got control of herself, she was already stamping her feet, and the red of her face was now purely from frustration. But she couldn’t find the words—there were no words to say why. There was

nothing she could do. She almost suspected that Ichika did this intentionally.

But really, if he did it'd be less of a problem. It was because he was such a blockhead that he kept accidentally sending her emotions boiling over. Even that morning, him offhandedly calling her cute nearly sent her heart springing from her mouth. *Well, it made me happy... But...* But what she really wanted was for him to only say that kind of thing around her. The understanding of how unlikely that was and the unavoidable yearning for it to happen tore at her young heart.

"I've been thinking, though. Now that my name for you is your real name, should I come up with a new nickname?"

"Eh? Are you sure?"

"I mean, if you don't mind." Charlotte energetically nodded. "Y-Yeah. It's fine. Sounds like a good idea."

Her anticipation and excitement brought her voice up a half-octave. Even as she struggled to hide her reaction, a flower garden bloomed in her heart. *Oh my God, what do I do? What's with him? I don't know if I'm ready for this... But, he likes me, he really likes me. Right? Right?!* The storm brewing in her heart began to leak into her voice. She cleared her throat to hide it while waiting intently for his answer.

"Makes sense to me. What about Charl? It rolls off the tongue well, and it's nice and intimate."

"Charl...? Yeah! That's good. No, it's great!"

"Oh? I'm glad you like it so much."

"Y-Yeah, kinda. Charl. Charl, huh." Charlotte giggled. Picture a team of four SD Charlottes dancing in the flower garden in her heart. With 'Please Stand By' text over the top, if possible.

"Anyway, Charl— can you do me a favor?"

"Huh? What?"

While Charlotte was still enveloped in bliss, Ichika thrust out his hand toward her. An almost visible question mark popped up over her head as he approached with a serious face and asked the fateful question.

"Will you go out with me?"

"Ehh...?!" Charlotte heard a sound like the heavens tearing apart.



"Great weather today, huh?"

The weekend. Sunday. The weather was beautifully clear. I was out on the town with a girl, getting ready for the class trip next week. Specifically, I was out with...

"....." For some reason, Charlotte—Charl—had a sullen look. She'd been like this all morning. I didn't get what she meant by "I

heard a sound which shattered my dreams.” She may have been in a mood, she may have just been drained, but either way there were storm clouds gathering in her expression.

Oh, and today, she was wearing a short-sleeved white blouse perfect for the weather. Under it was a light gray tank top, the same color as her skirt. The skirt was tiered, and cut short to show off the beautiful lines of her legs 120%— yeah, it was cute. It was stunning, in complete contrast to her expression, and fashionable as well.

“What’s wrong, Charl? Not feeling well today?” I turned toward her with a worried look, only to have my face pushed back away.

“.....” Silently, too. Yet her expression was shouting condemnation.

“Charl, uh...”

“Ichika.”

“Huh?”

“Men who play with girls’ emotions should be kicked to death by a horse.”

Wow, that was pretty harsh all of a sudden. But I couldn’t disagree. Not just girls. You shouldn’t do that to anyone. It was just cruel. Only a real stinker would do that.

“Yeah, they should all be dead.”

“Look in a mirror sometime.”

Huh, did I have bed head? I didn’t want to look like a loser.

“So... You just wanted to go out shopping, huh. Now that I think of it, you did the same thing last month, didn’t you, Ichika. *Siiiiigh...*”

Again, that sudden 20,000-league sigh. What was she so mad about? Was going out shopping with me really such a drag?

“Listen, I’m sorry. But you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to, okay? I don’t mind if you go back and just take the day off. It’s important to take care of yourself.”

“.....”

Her silence was overpowering. Ugh, it was like being strangled with a silk thread. Incredibly awkward. Because it was so awkward, I hunted for whatever blame I could take.

“Um... Why don’t I get you a parfait at the place by the station to thank you for coming along?”

“Just a parfait?”

“How about some cake, too? And something to drink.”

“Mmm. Oh, and—” She suddenly held out her hand. Hm? Did she want to shake hands? Nah, couldn’t be. For a moment, it seemed like she was glaring at me. Umm... Think. Think. “You can hold my hand.”

“Oh, just that? Sure.”

Now that I thought of it, she was a foreigner in a strange city. She’d have a tough time if we got separated. Almost everyone has

Sunday off, so the area near the station was pretty crowded. Holding hands so we didn't get separated was the kind of clever idea I was used to from her. I should try to learn from her example.

"....." Huh? Why was she so quiet all of a sudden? Her face was redder than before, and she didn't want to make eye contact. Did she have a cold?

"Are you okay?"

"Wha— What do you mean?!"

"C'mon, Charl. Are you sure you don't need to just go rest?"

"N-No! I'm fine! Absolutely fine! Let's go!" She suddenly started walking, pulling me toward the station. Holding her hand, I couldn't help but think about how delicate it was. Its warmth made my heart beat faster.



As Ichika and Charlotte walked toward the station, two unseen figures watched from the shadows. When the crossing sign turned green, and Ichika and Charlotte disappeared into the crowd, the two emerged into sight. One was an energetic girl with two braids, and the other was an elegant blonde. In other words, they were Ling and Cecilia.

"Hold it..."

"What is it?"

"Were they... holding hands?"

"They certainly were..." As they recounted the obvious, Cecilia, still grinning, gripped her drink bottle. With a sploosh, the cap popped off.

"I knew it. I wasn't seeing things. I wasn't daydreaming. I knew it — I'm going to kill him." Ling's clenched fist, already enveloped in IS armor, was ready for combat. Her impact cannon was two seconds away from firing. Such is the terrifying passion of a teenage girl.

"It seems as though they're having fun. I suppose I should join in."

".....?!"

A sudden voice from behind shocked the two. Standing there was a figure they'd never forget after their defeat last month—Laura.

"When did you get here?!"

"Don't be so standoffish. I have no intention of harming you."

"Why should I believe you?! If you want a rematch, we're ready!"

Memories of their two-on-one defeat only strengthened Ling and Cecilia's doubts. Laura, though, continued calmly.

"If you could kindly forgive me for that." Laura's nonchalance robbed the duo of words for a moment. Soon enough, though, they found them.

"Seriously, you want us to forgive that?"

“The nerve, to even ask such a thing!”

“Oh well. I’ll just go after Ichika, then. See you.” As Laura paced off, Ling and Cecilia momentarily stopped in their tracks.

“Ho-Hold up!”

“Indeed! Whatever are you going to do when you catch up to him?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Ask to join in. That’s all.” The casual answer made them recoil. They weren’t sure whether to hate or envy such a straightforward response.

“Wait. Just wait. The most important thing to do when faced with an unknown force is to gather intelligence, right?”

“You have a point. What’s your plan, then?”

“First we trail them, to find out exactly what’s going on between them.”

“Makes sense. I’m in.”

And thus, for absurd reasons, the stalker trio was formed.



“This should be the place with the swimsuits.” We were on the second floor of the shopping mall by the station. Everything came together here: trains, the subway, buses, and taxis. You could get to here from anywhere in the city, and you could get to anywhere in the city from here.

The mall, called Resonance, linked the station itself with the surrounding below-street-level retailers. In the resulting complex, you could eat your fill of western, Chinese, and Japanese food while browsing everything from no-frills casual wear to the most famous global brands. There was entertainment for everyone from children to the elderly, too. In other words, if you couldn’t find it there, you couldn’t find it anywhere in the city. It was kinda—no, it was really amazing. Oh, and it seemed kind of weird to call it ‘by the station’ when it wrapped completely around the station. But it started out that way, so I guess there was no changing it now. In middle school, Dan and Rin and I spent plenty of afternoons here. Coming back was kind of nostalgic.

“Were you going to get a swimsuit too, Charl?”

“Well... Ichika, did you want to see me in a swimsuit?”

Hm? That was a weird question. Shouldn’t she be more worried about whether she was going to swim? Sometimes I didn’t get why she said things.

“I guess. You should take advantage of the chance to go swimming. It’s been a long time since I have, so I’m looking forward to it.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I won’t have the chance that often, so I guess



I'll get a new one." Charl nodded repeatedly as her grip tightened. She must have been as excited as I was at the chance to swim in the sea. You really need the sea and watermelons and fireworks to make it summer. Yeah.

"The men's and women's are in different departments, should we split up?"

"Ah..." Charles sighed regretfully as she let go of my hand. Even after, she kept looking at me with the expression of a child who wanted something but didn't know how to ask for it.

"Um, what's up?"

"Ah, er. Oh, it's nothing."

"Oh? Then, let's meet back up here in thirty minutes."

"Got it." With a deep nod, she headed towards the women's department. A rainbow of different colors were on display, and just looking at them made me feel like I was in the tropics.

"Can't get distracted. I need to pick out something for myself."

Luckily, I'd managed to work up a decent war chest doing part-time jobs in middle school. And since I lived at the IS Academy dorms, meals and utilities were covered. Ah, IS Academy, run directly by the Japanese government. Such a wonderful place.

Anyway, though, it'd been a long time since I'd picked out a swimsuit. There were a lot of things in some truly outrageous colors, but I went for something in a basic navy blue. *This'll do the trick. I still have around ten minutes left, but I guess I'll head back to the meeting place, anyway.* I set off for where Charl and I had split up. When I arrived, though, I was surprised to find her there waiting for me.

"Huh? That was quick. Are you done already?"

"Ah, um. I wanted you to help me pick."

"Oh? Well, let's go look then." With that in my mind, I set foot in the women's swimsuit department. But... Honestly, there were so many more colors and styles here. I was a bit hesitant, not even knowing where to start.

*Um... Well, I guess Charl wanted me to, so I should just deal with it.* It being Sunday, there were women all around. They, likewise, seemed to immediately notice a man entering the department.

"You, there."

"Hm?" I glanced around, but didn't see anyone else she could mean but Charl and myself.

"You, the boy. Can you put this swimsuit back on the rack for me?" She didn't even know my name, yet she was ordering me around. In the 10 years since the introduction of IS, misandry had spread throughout the world. Every country was run by women. A man couldn't even walk down the street without having someone he didn't know ordering him around. But I—

“Why me? Do it yourself. Get in the habit of just ordering people around, and sooner or later your brain’s gonna leak out your ears.”

I absolutely hated that. I didn’t mind if it was someone I knew, but if I’d never met you? Not even listening. And if I did listen, of course I wasn’t gonna do it.

“Oh, so that’s how you’re going to be? You need to learn your place.” With that, she called for security. See, misandry. All she had to do was accuse me of getting violent, and no jury in the country would acquit me. What a world.

“Isn’t that enough? He’s here with me.” Charl spoke up just in time. At least, since they were both women, things wouldn’t get any further out of hand.

“Oh, is he your man? You need to train him better.”

*Oh, I see how it is. Men are just dogs.* Really, though, only a few women were this arrogant. Most still thought men had a place in society. Though, all too often, that place was doing work for women.

“Ugh, this is why I can’t stand men.” Grumbling to herself, the woman stalked off. I guess something else had just set her off. A stress-ridden society wasn’t good for anyone.

“Sorry, Ichika. I didn’t mean to drag you into that.”

“Mm? Oh, don’t worry about it. Thanks for covering for me, you really saved my skin.”

“Of course I would. Anyway, let me show you what I’m thinking of.”

“Sure.” As soon as I answered, Charl pulled me along. In my confusion, I didn’t notice that she had pulled me straight into the changing room. Wait... What?

“Well, you won’t really be able to tell without seeing me in it, right?”

Er, um, I mean, that was true, but still. Now that I thought of it, I remembered the big sign by the seasonal display saying that women could try on swimsuits. It seemed like that was in demand. Apparently, after they were tried on an employee took them to be cleaned. How luxurious. The tentacles of the matriarchy had spread even to here.

“Hold on a second, I’ll get changed.”

“Okay, I’ll step out for a second and—”

“No!”

She could tell me ‘no,’ but...

“It’s okay. I won’t take long.” As she spoke, Charl suddenly pulled off her top.

“Wha—” Flustered, I spun away from her. I was alone with Charl in the tiny changing cubicle. The sounds from just behind me of clothing being pulled off made my heart pound, whether I wanted it

to or not. And in a space this tight, I couldn't help but immediately notice that smell only girls had. *Ugh, no! I need to stay calm!*

"Er, Charl?"

"What?"

"Um..." I wanted to ask how this ended up happening, but not wanting to be so direct, I was at a loss for words.

"Mm..." I heard the swoosh of something light landing on fabric. Could that have been—could that have been anything but the sound of her panties sliding off? *What do I do? What is she doing?!*



*Ugh, they're really out for blood... What am I going to do?* Charlotte had realized that the trio were trailing her. All IS were equipped with a special data infrastructure called the 'Core Network.' Since IS were developed for use in space exploration, they could precisely locate each other even at interplanetary ranges. Of course, this required both IS' operators to authorize the sharing of location data, but, even without doing so, their approximate location could be derived. However, a stealth mode was available in order to evade detection. All three of the trio had activated stealth mode on their IS, which was precisely how Charlotte knew they were there. Each had stealth mode active, meaning none of them wanted to be detected, which meant they were trailing her. Laura's military training meant she was unlikely to slip up and be seen in the act, but Charlotte was more than perceptive enough to recognize that she was there, too.

*Mmm... Too bad they're probably not gonna give up and go home.* Whatever else was going on, she had gone out together with Ichika—rather, they were on a date. Whether Ichika agreed with this interpretation was irrelevant; Charlotte certainly believed it from the bottom of her heart. This was the determination of a blooming maiden. In her heart and in her mind, she was giving this 120%. *Pulling him into a changing room was probably going a bit too far...* Her face burned as she sensed his form behind her. It seemed he wasn't quite sure how to react, either, as he'd been staring at the ceiling for some time.

*Ugh... He probably thinks I'm a weirdo now...* They were together in a changing room without even a screen between them, and she'd stripped completely naked. It had to be embarrassing for him, too. She tightly gripped her pendant—the IS Revive's standby form, a small cross. *But he's a Dreadnought-class blockhead anyway, and I had no other choice...* *Ugh, let's just get this over with!* Charlotte, her face red, stepped out of her panties. Tossing them on top of her other clothes, she slid the swimsuit over her naked body. It should be pointed out that there was no official record of the Royal Navy's Dreadnought, commissioned

in 1906, being a blockhead. It wasn't even a person, in fact. So, pardon her.



“You can turn around now.”

“Okay...”

Even though she had pulled him into the changing room to show him the swimsuit, as Charlotte felt Ichika’s gaze on her, her heart pounded. Twining her fingers together to conceal her nervousness, she awaited Ichika’s opinion with bated breath.

Ichika himself, though, was triply flustered—by being pulled into a changing room, by being changed next to, and by seeing her in the swimsuit. All he could do was blush. *He isn’t saying anything... Doesn’t he like the design? Now that I think of it, it’s a bit risqué...* The swimsuit in question was not quite a one-piece and not quite a two-piece, with a strip of cloth running down her back between a bikini top and bottom. Its color was a summery bright yellow, and its front made every effort to show off her cleavage.

“If you don’t like it, there’s another one I was—”

“N-No! I think it looks good! It’ll be fine, Charl!” Ichika had been on edge since she’d begun to change, and the tension made him blurt it all out at once.

They may not have been particularly romantic words, but Charlotte, who was just as nervous as he was, took them as the sweetest praise.

“Okay, this one it is.”

“Sure. I’ll head out, then.” Ichika darted to open the door to the dressing room before Charl could pull him back.

“Eh?”

“Ehh?”

“Ehhhhhh?”

Somehow, of all the people in the world who could have been standing in front of it, there was none other than his class’s vice homeroom teacher, Ms. Maya Yamada. And, from behind her, Chifuyu poked her head around to see what the commotion was.

“What on earth are you doing?!”

A moment later, Ms. Yamada let out a panicked shriek.



“I understand that he was helping you choose a swimsuit, but you mustn’t go into the changing room together. It’s bad for your development.”

“Sorry, ma’am...” Charlotte bowed her head.

Man, this really sucked. Charl has been getting in so much trouble lately, and it was always my fault. Forgive me, Charl.

“What are Ms. Yamada and you doing here, Chifu—uh, Ms. Orimura?” *Changing the subject to distract them. Good job, me.*

“We came to get swimsuits, too. Oh, and we’re not at school, so you can call me by name.”

I... kinda wasn’t quite sure about that. Putting aside Ms. Yamada, Chifuyu may have been acting casual, but she was still in her suit. If I called her ‘big sis Chifuyu’ in front of other people, she’d probably get mad again. Oh, and—

“Isn’t it about time you show yourselves?”

I thought I heard the sound of a nervous hiccup. No, it must have been my imagination.

“Why, we were just about to.”

“Yeah. We were just waiting for the right timing.” Two figures stepped out from behind a pillar. It was Rin and Cecilia.

“I’ve been wondering for a while what you’re doing sneaking around like that.”

“Sometimes girls don’t want boys to know what they’re shopping for.”

“Indeed! Ichika, your lack of delicacy never fails to leave me speechless.”

Whew, I don’t know why, but they definitely seem mad. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked that.

“Let’s just finish this up and get back to campus,” Chifuyu half-sighed. It looked like she was holding a swimsuit. She and Ms. Yamada had probably both narrowed it down already.

“Ah, hold on. I forgot, there was something else I wanted. I, er, don’t really remember where it was, so Huang and Alcott, could you come with me? Dunois, too.”

Huh? What was up with Ms. Yamada? The look in her eyes as she pulled the other three students away was as if she’d just had a Eureka moment. This left just me and Chifuyu there, and a few dozen seconds of awkward silence passed.

“Ugh, sometimes she tries too hard.”

“Eh?”

“Sigh... Complaining won’t solve it, I guess, Ichika.”

“What is it, Ms. Orimura?” I was so unused to her calling me by my given name that I wasn’t quite sure how to react. Looking at my strained expression, Chifuyu gave me a wry grin.

“We’re not at school. Just call me Chifuyu. We’re brother and sister, right?”

“Got it.”

I guess blood was thicker than water. What was Ms. Yamada so worried about, anyway?

“Anyway, Ichika. Which swimsuit do you think looks better?”

As she spoke, she held up the hanger in her hands, and I saw two swimsuits on it. One was a sporty but sexy black outfit with mesh

panels. The other was a pure white, without a single nod to form over function. Of course, both were bikinis, which would show a lot of skin. *Hmm... Yeah, the black one.* That was when it struck me. If she went with the black one, she'd probably attract a bunch of weirdos. No, not probably— a 100% chance. The white one was plenty sexy too, but at least it'd be less likely to attract catcalls.

"The white one..." I thought I'd managed to make it seem like I was telling the truth, but Chifuyu just gave me another wry grin.

"The black one, you said?"

"No, the white—"

"Don't lie to me. I saw your eyes jump straight to the black one. You've always stared at things you're interested in. It makes it really easy to tell what you're thinking."

Ugh... She saw right through me.

"You worry way too much about me. Do I really seem like the kind of girl who would let a beach bum pick her up?"

"Well, no, not really, but... You know, Chifuyu, are you ever going to get a boyfriend? I've never heard you talk about one."

"Probably, when I don't have my hands full with a little brother anymore."

I didn't really have a good answer to that. I'd had a part-time job in middle school, but almost all of—really, 99% of my money came from Chifuyu. One time, I tried insisting that I should shop for myself, but she'd told me "Why don't you spend that money on a girl you like, instead?" I didn't even have one of those.

"And what about you?"

"Me? What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. When are you finding a girlfriend? You're positively swimming in girls at school. Are there just so many that you can't pick one?"

"Swimming in them..." I used to think that was literal, when I was a little kid. Too bad it wasn't. If it was, I would've already had swim trunks and I could've avoided this whole mess.

"Hey, what about Laura? It wouldn't always be easy, but once she fell for you, I don't think she'll ever change her mind. And she's not that bad of a looker, either," she continued.

"Well, um..."

"Plus, you've already kissed, right?"

Ugh. Did she have to remind me? How was I even supposed to respond to that? Maybe it was because of my frustration that her wry smile from before turned upward into a heartfelt grin.

"You could do worse, you know?"

"It's not that, I just don't really know if..."

"I see. What about her looks? Is she your type?"



“Well, hmm. I guess she’s kind of cute.”

“What was that?”

“Laura’s cu— What are you making me say?!”

“You’re the one who said it.” Well, she was right. It’s not like she didn’t lead me into it, but it was my fault for taking the bait.

“Anyway, you should deal with your own problems before worrying about me. I’m not old enough that I need my little brother matchmaking for me.”

“Okay, okay, I get it. I won’t worry about weird things. Is that okay?”

“Yeah. That’s fine.” With a final grin, Chifuyu left to pay for her purchases. I stood still for a little while, too flustered to decide whether to follow her or wait for Ms. Yamada to come back.



Rewinding time a few minutes. Ling, Cecilia, and Laura had started off in hot pursuit, but they slowly began to realize that, no matter how seriously Charlotte was taking the excursion, Ichika wasn’t.

“He’s just being himself again... The granite blockhead, Orimura Ichika.”

Laura decided to call off the pursuit, worried that they were more likely to be caught than to find anything. Separating from Ling and Cecilia, she made her way to the rainbow array of swimsuits. There, behind a wall of beachwear, she could stay without any worry of being seen.

*Hmm. Now that I think of it, I should pick one up for myself.* Recalling her school-issued swimsuit, though, Laura changed her mind. By the way, IS Academy swimsuits were the old school indigo-blue ones, long past endangered and now approaching extinct in the wild. They even had the name patches. *Whatever. If I can swim in it, it’ll be fine. It’s perfectly functional. No need for a second one.* Laura coldly eyed the line of swimsuits, yet in the next moment, her pale flesh flushed a deep red.

“Laura’s cute.” Suddenly, she heard Ichika’s voice speak those words. She’d realized he was talking with Chifuyu, but not habitually being an eavesdropper, she’d tuned out their conversation until they caught her off guard.

“.....” The sudden words painted her face crimson as the pounding of her heart slammed into top gear. She couldn’t stop the pounding sound from her chest.

“You should appreciate me more,” she’d said over and over to Ichika, but he never had, so of course she’d never heard him call her cute. To hear it suddenly out of the blue was such a shock that even

the German ice queen, Laura, would naturally be sent aflutter.

*C-Cute? I... I'm cute?* Her gaze darted back and forth in a panic before she clutched a hand to her chest and closed her eyes. Even using a focusing technique she almost never had to resort to, it took Laura try after try to open up the proper IS private channel.



At the same time, at a military base in Germany. The IS-equipped special forces flight Schwarze Hase—Black Rabbit—was conducting drills. Of the ten IS in the entire country, three were assigned to this unit. That alone stood as proof of its elite status, both in name and operationally. Just like the eyepatched black rabbit in its insignia, every member, including its leader Laura, had an eye implanted with IS-assist nanomachines. The eyepatch may once have been intended as a limiter for Laura, but now, it was a measure to protect their enhanced vision and a sign of loyalty to their commander.

“What’s the hold-up? You’re thirty-seven seconds late! Hurry it up!” The source of this roar was the executive officer, one Klarissa Harfouch. Aged 22, and the oldest of its members, she often acted as a strict but supportive older sister figure to the teens around her. Suddenly, her personal IS Schwarzer Zweig—a.k.a. Black Branch—received a private channel transmission which may as well have been a coded SOS.

“Roger. This is Lt. Klarissa Harfouch.”

“I-It’s me...” Even though identifying by name and rank was technically mandatory, the waver in the voice on the other end kept Klarissa from responding with anything sharper than a questioning look.

“Commander Laura Bodewig. Is there some problem?”

“Yeah... A very, very big problem...”

Impressed with the gravity of the situation by Laura’s condition, Klarissa quickly hand-signaled the rest of the flight to stop and gather.

“Shall we deploy?”

“No, I don’t need the entire flight. This isn’t a military problem.”

“Then...?”

“Klarissa. I, ah. I... I’m apparently ‘cute.’”

“Yes... And?” Klarissa’s flat, martial tone suddenly rose half an octave. Her staccato operational delivery in the face of unknown danger drifted off into dumbfoundedness.

“Ichika... Ichika said so...”

That was enough for Klarissa to regain her bearings.

“Orimura’s little brother, right? The one you said you had a thing for?”

“Well... What do I do, Klarissa? What should I do in this kind of

situation?”

“Well. I need more information. Did he say it to you directly?”

“No, he doesn’t seem to realize I’m here.”

“That’s the best thing that could happen.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Praise for someone who isn’t there has to be true.”

“I see!” Laura’s voice, which had been shaking like a leaf, steadied and smoothed out like a flower opening. At the same time as this conversation was occurring, Klarissa was holding up notes to the gathered squadmates.

[*COMMANDER’S CRUSH NOTICED HER*] The crowd of a dozen or so girls let out an “Ooooooh!” in unison.

By the way, at first Laura hadn’t gotten along well with the others at all, but after the VT incident the prior month, she’d told Klarissa there was ‘a guy she liked’ and that cleared it all up. To give a small piece of that conversation...

*“What?! The Commander’s interested in a guy?!”*

*“I was convinced she was head-over-heels for Orimura!”*

*“True, true. I thought so myself. But then she came to me—Laura, of all people—And asked, ‘how do I get a guy’s attention?’”*

*“Woooooow!”*

*“So I didn’t pull any punches, I gave her the truth! In Japan, when you’re into someone, you tell them you’ll make them your bride!”*

*“Wow, XO! You know all about Japan!”*

*“Of course I do. I didn’t read all that shoujo manga for nothing.”*

*“Wow!”*

*“You’re awesome! You know everything!”*

*“But Laura being cute is even better.”*

*“Yeah! Agreed! Oh, why couldn’t we get along with her this well when she was here?”*

*“Hey, they cook red rice in Japan at times like this, right?”*

*“I believe so. I think it’s to show that there are things thicker than blood.”*

*“Wow, Japan is amazing!”*

*“I wish I lived there.”*

*“All right. That concludes training for today. Report to the mess hall for some red rice!”*

*“Yes, ma’am!”*

...Was around how it went. As was typical of teenage (and a few 20-something) girls, it didn’t take much to put them at odds, but it also didn’t take much to patch things up between them.

“Anyway, er, right now I’m in the swimwear department, and...”

“Swimwear, huh? You have that beach trip coming up, don’t you. What’d you pick out?”

“Ah? I was just going to wear my school—”

“What kind of fool are you?!”

“.....?!”

“Okay, sure, IS Academy uses a traditional school swimsuit. There’s nothing wrong with that, at least, I don’t think so. A fair number of guys have a fetish for it, at least. But it’s—”

“I-It’s what?” Laura swallowed nervously.

“It’s not sexy at all!”

“Wha—”

“You may not have the curves to draw attention, but if you try to fall back on cliches like that you’ll never catch his eye, either!”

“What do I do, then?”

“Heh. Leave it to me. I have a plan.” Klarissa’s voice rang with enthusiasm, as her eyes gleamed.

## Chapter II: Ocean at Eleven

“Look! It’s the ocean!”

As the bus pulled out of the tunnel, the girls riding erupted in excitement. Their first day at the shore was blessed with perfect weather. The sun’s rays gently caressed the water, as a relaxing sea breeze stirred the air.

“Whoa. I can’t wait to get in the water.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” In the seat next to me was Charl. But the whole drive here, it seemed like she wasn’t really paying attention to what I was saying. Even now, she just kept staring down at her hands in her lap.

“You like that thing that much?”

“Ah, yeah. I guess.” Charl giggled.

I had bought the bracelet around her left wrist for her as thanks for going shopping with me. Now, she kept looking down at the silver encircling her wrist, with a grin that seemed like it would break out in the laugh of a happy memory at any moment. I felt a little bad. If I’d known she would be so taken with it, I may have chosen something more expensive. She told me to ‘pick what I thought would look good on her,’ but I still wasn’t sure I’d made the right choice.

“Ehehe~♪” Wow, she was really in a good mood.

“Well, you’re certainly in a fine mood today, Charlotte.” From across the aisle, Cecilia stifled a sullen scowl.

“Yeah. It’s wonderful. Sorry.” Charl giggled again. Even Cecilia’s poking couldn’t take the smile off her face. Wow, this was almost scary. I guess she was really looking forward to the ocean. Not that I wasn’t.

“It’s unfair enough that you two snuck away alone yesterday, but a gift, too?”

“Ahh... Well, uh. Maybe I’ll get you something later?” It seemed like Cecilia wanted a present, too. She didn’t have to sulk like that, though.

“Do you promise?”

“Sure. Can’t guarantee you anything too expensive, though.”

The promise was enough to secure me a “Very well, I suppose that makes up for it.” Still, if I was going to be spending money like this I’d need to find another job. I had no interest in burning through my savings.

Surprisingly, quietly seated next to Cecilia was Laura. She seemed like she wasn't feeling well, as she kept glancing around oddly.

"Are you okay? You've been acting like this since we ran into each other yesterday. What's wrong?"

"....."

"Hey, Laura. Heeeeeey." She didn't respond at all, so I got up to get a closer look at her face.

"Huh?! W-Wait! Don't get so close, you idiot!"

"Oomph!" She pushed me back by my nose, as I let out a strange sound. She must have had a cold or a fever or something, as her face was beginning to flush. Oh well. There was no need to worry too much, she knew how to take care of herself. Since Laura seemed like she'd be okay, I turned my attention to Houki, who was in the seat behind her.

"Hey, let's go swimming once we get there. You're a great swimmer, right?"

"I-I guess. Sure. I used to go for long swims a lot."

Hm? Something was up with Houki, too. She seemed nervous, like she couldn't calm down for some reason.

"We're about to arrive. Everyone, sit back down." Chifuyu's orders were obeyed immediately. She certainly has a talent for command. She was right, too. Almost immediately after, our bus pulled up in front of the resort we were staying at. The first year students of IS Academy poured out of our four buses in single file.

"This is Kagetsu-sou. We'll be staying here for the next three days. I don't want any of you causing any trouble at all for the staff, understood?"

"Hello!" After Chifuyu finished speaking, we greeted the innkeeper. A kimono-clad woman, her polite bow spoke to many years of successful class trips here.

"Of course! We hope you enjoy your stay. You all seem so energetic this year! That's wonderful."

She seemed to be in her 30s, and gave off the air of a hard-working and reliable woman. Maybe it was just because of the constant smile her job called for, but if anything, she seemed a bit young to be the innkeeper.

"Oh, and is that him?" As I made eye contact with her, she asked Chifuyu.

"Sure is. Sorry to make you rearrange the baths for just one boy."

"No, it's no problem at all. He seems like such a fine young man. So reliable."

"And wouldn't it be wonderful if he actually was. Hurry up and say hello, silly." Chifuyu gave a peremptory nod. *Wait, didn't I*

already? Seriously...

"I'm Orimura Ichika. Pleased to meet you."

"Polite, too. I'm Kiyosu Keiko." She gave another bow. It was just as proper and formal as the previous one. It made me nervous, as I wasn't really good at dealing with grown-up women.

"Sorry to inflict my useless little brother on you."

"Why, Ms. Orimura! You're so strict with him."

"I learned the hard way." I didn't think it was that bad, but there were plenty of reasons I couldn't really argue with her. Ahh, how I wish I was grown-up and out of her hair...

"Anyway, everyone, let me show you to your rooms. If you're going to swim, we have a separate beach house for you to change in. Feel free to make use of it. If you have any questions, feel free to ask any of our staff."

With a chorus of 'yeses,' the girls set forth into the resort. It seemed like the plan was to drop our bags off first. Oh, and the first day was completely free time. We could have a meal at the kitchen anytime.

"Hey! Hey, Orimu!" Ugh, no one would be calling me that but Miss Casual. She waved, and walked toward me as sloooooowly as ever. She had the expression of someone who'd probably dozed off on the bus. Didn't seem to have any makeup on, either. "Where's your room, Orimu? You weren't on the list. Tell me! I wanna hang out!"

Overhearing her, the other girls gathered around and pushed in to find out for themselves, too. Why did she want to know which room was mine? There was nothing interesting in there. At least, I didn't think there was.

"Honestly, I don't know either. Maybe they have me in the hallway."

"Hey, that sounds fun. Maybe I'll try it, too. The floor's probably nice and cool."

It was summer, so she was right, it might actually be enjoyable. Nah, probably not. Anyway, since it'd be a bad thing if I had any girls sleeping over, my room was somewhere else. At least, that's what Ms. Yamada said. She didn't give me any other details.

"Orimura, your room's this way. Follow me." Oh, that was Chifuyu calling for me. I couldn't keep her waiting, so I left Miss Casual with a "Talk to you later."

"Uh, Ms. Orimura? Where's my room?"

"Shut up and follow." No questions allowed, I guess. This place really was nice and spacious, though. Beautiful, too. It was amazing enough that they'd found a place that could fit the entire class, but it was even more impressive that it was somewhere that did such a good job of blending traditional ambiance with modern conveniences. It

was great to have working air conditioning. The halls were cool and comfortable.

“Here it is.”

“Eh? But this is...”

A sign reading ‘Faculty’ hung from the door. Um...

“We thought about getting you your own room, but we had no idea how we’d keep the girls away from it at night.” Chifuyu rasped out a sigh. “So you’re staying with me. This way, they won’t have such an easy time of it.”

“Well, that’s true, but...”

No guts, no glory. Though I don’t think anyone would be gutsy enough to risk her for me.

“I shouldn’t need to remind you, but in case I do, I’m still a teacher.”

“Yes, Ms. Orimura.”

“Very well.” With that, she let me into the room. It was quite large for a double room, and the exterior wall was one wide row of windows. The view was a beautiful expanse of sea. It was east-facing, so I was sure the sunrise would look fantastic as well.

“Wow, this is amazing.”

The toilet and bath were separate. Even the sink had its own small room. The spacious tub was huge enough for even a guy to stretch his legs out.

“If you want to use the main baths, you’ve got your own time. They’re usually kept split down the middle, but we’re not exactly an even group. It wouldn’t be fair to cram them all in just for you, so keep it to the time set aside for you. If you want to bathe early in the morning or late at night, use the one in here.”

“Understood.”

Man, even when we were alone together Chifuyu was so focused on her job, but that was how she was. I totally would have just called her Chifuyu earlier if she hadn’t reminded me.

“Anyway, the rest of your day is free. Leave your things here and go do whatever.”

“And you, Ms. Orimura?”

“I have to meet up with the other teachers, check things out, and stuff. But—” Chifuyu coughed, clearing her throat. “I suppose a quick swim wouldn’t hurt anyone. After all, I have the swimsuit my brother picked out to try on.”

“I see.” I gave a disinterested reply, but my heart sped up a little. I was actually really happy that she went with my pick. And how long had it been since I’d seen her in a swimsuit? Hmm...

**Knock, knock.** A rapping at the door interrupted my chain of thought.



“Do you have a minute, Ms. Orimura?” That voice had to be Ms. Yamada.

“Sure, come in.” Hearing the response, Ms. Yamada opened the door. As she did, she came eye to eye with me, just across from the entrance.

“O-Orimura!”

“You don’t have to be that surprised...” It seemed like she was there for whatever the teachers had to go over. She’d been reading over some paperwork as she stepped into the room. It was only when she looked up that she saw me.

“S-Sorry. I’d forgotten that he was staying in your room.”

“Ms. Yamada, wasn’t it your idea to begin with?”

“Y-Yes. Yes, it was. I’m sorry!” Ms. Yamada shuffled back and forth under Chifuyu’s glare as if it were the gaze of a snake ready to strike.

“Anyway, Orimura, I need to get to work. Go find somewhere else to be.”

“Yes. I think I’ll head straight to the ocean.”

“Try not to overdo it.” One more acknowledgment of her warning, and I was gone. In the light backpack I’d pulled from my luggage, there was my swimsuit, a towel, and a pair of clean underwear. *Set sail for the sea, full speed ahead!*



“.....”

“.....”

Houki and I happened to bump into each other on the way to the beach house where we could change. There wasn’t anything really strange about that. Especially not compared to the sight that greeted us shortly after.

Smack in the middle of the footpath was a pair of bunny ears. Not, like, the ears of an actual rabbit. Bunny ears. The kind a bunny girl would wear. They were white. Dangling from them was a sign reading ‘pull me.’

“Huh, what’s—”

“Dunno. Don’t ask me. Not my problem.”

Shot down before the question was even out of my mouth. This absolutely had to be her, then. Someone of limitless talent. A genius among geniuses. The woman who claimed to put in 35 hours a day. The inventor of the IS, and Houki’s big sister. This had to be none other than Shinonono Tabane.

“Um... Should I pull them?”

“Do whatever. I don’t care.” Houki stalked off down the path. Hmm, it looked like she still hadn’t patched things up with Tabane.

Left alone, I shrugged and gave the ears a swift yank.

**Pop.**

“Wha—” I’d been convinced Tabane herself was hiding buried under them, but I was wrong. I’d put so much force into it that I fell over. “Oww...”

“What on earth are you doing?”

“Oh, hey, Cecilia. I just found a pair of bunny— Ah.”

I cast my gaze in the direction of her voice. Unfortunately, since I was still on the ground, that meant I was looking straight up her skirt.

“Ichika! What’s gotten into you?!”

Noticing my line of sight, she pressed down on her skirt while backing away. They were white, with lace. *Wait, what kind of idiot am I? Why am I paying attention to that?*

“Sorry. I, uh. I saw a pair of bunny ears growing, so...”

“So... What?” Cecilia fired back with an incredulous voice. I mean, it made sense. If someone had told me the same thing, I’d be looking at them like... Well, like they’d just grown bunny ears. Oh, and Cecilia’s cheeks were burning red, partly from embarrassment and partly from anger.

“No, I mean, Tabane is—”

**Fshooooom!**

Huh? It sounded almost like something was swooping down on— whoa!

**BA-BOOM!** An unidentified flying object pierced the ground. And, of all things, it looked like...

“A... carrot?”

Cecilia and I both gasped. It wasn’t even shaped like a normal carrot, it was shaped like a cutesy drawing of a carrot. What the hell was going on?!

“Hahaha! I can’t believe you pulled that, Icky!”

The carrot split in half, and preceded by her own laugh, the aforementioned genius Shinonono Tabane stepped out. I doubt she had any idea how to make a normal entrance...

“Oh, hey, since I flew here in a missile I almost got shot down by an interceptor! Looks like I learned my lesson about that. Argh, I can’t believe their nerve, though!”

Tabane was wearing a blue and white one piece like Alice’s from ‘Alice in Wonderland.’ She took the bunny ears from my hand and immediately placed them on her head. *Alice in Wonderland in one outfit...* Her fashion sense was as inscrutable as ever.



“Long time no see, Tabane.”

“Yeah. It’s been forever. Seriously. Hey, Icky, have you seen Houki? I thought you were just with her. Did she have to go pee or something?”

“Um...”

Houki had gone somewhere to avoid Tabane, but I couldn’t exactly tell her that, so I wasn’t sure what to say.

“Well, I can find her with the scouter I invented, easy. See you later, Icky!”

Tabane ran off. Wow, she was fast. It seemed like the scouter she was talking about was those bunny ears, and they perked up in the direction Houki was in like a dowsing rod. Wait, was that how dowsing rods worked?

“Ichika? What was that?”

“Tabane. Houki’s big sister.”

“What? Really? That was the Professor Shinonono?! The one who’s missing and being hunted by several countries?!”

“Yep, that Shinonono Tabane.”

Oh, and the point of this seashore class trip was to allow the wide-area unrestricted operation of IS. So mountains of the latest models were arriving, addressed to the various national cadets. However, since of course piloting by outsiders wasn’t allowed, it seemed that they were being delivered by special landing craft. Except, of course, for Tabane. She dove right in, damn the regulations. What was she really after, anyway?

“Ah, well. She wanted Houki for something. It doesn’t really have anything to do with us. Anyway, I was heading down to the ocean. What about you?”

“Why, of course, I was as well.” Cecilia cleared her throat. *Is she trying to imitate Chifuyu?* “I can’t exactly put suntan oil on my own back. I don’t suppose I could ask you to do it for me?”

“Mm? Why not get a friend to do it?”

“Well, really, if you wouldn’t mind...”

Jeez, wasn’t she just embarrassed that I saw her panties? Cecilia fidgeted back and forth, trying to avoid eye contact.

“Hmm, why don’t you just pour it down your back instead?”

“No thank you!”

She refused immediately. It was a joke, but it seemed like she took it the wrong way. It’s always scary trying to joke around with girls.

“I was just kidding. Anyway, sure, it’s no big deal.”

“Really? You’re not going to change your mind later or anything?”

Wow, was she really that concerned about burning? I hardly ever saw her that enthusiastic about something. And there I was, not

bothering with sunscreen at all.

“Of course not. See you later, then.”

“Very well, then. Later!” Nodding twice, she ran off toward the beach house. She wasn’t as fast as Tabane, but she was still quite fleet of foot.

“I should get going, too.”

It should have been no surprise that I was asked to use the changing stall furthest in. Oh, and they weren’t kidding when they called it a beach house. It opened right up onto the sand. That said, the changing stall furthest in meant that I had to walk by everyone else’s on the way. Of course I wasn’t able to see inside, but it was still awkward hearing the high-pitched voices from behind the curtains.

“Wow, Mika, your breasts are so big. Have they been growing lately?”

“Eek! Don’t touch them!”

“Tina, your swimsuit is so daring! I can’t believe you’re wearing that in public.”

“Really? This is about normal in America.”

Ah, the things you overhear... Honestly, I couldn’t really deal with it. It was kind of embarrassing, though I wasn’t quite sure why. Walking swiftly, I made my way to the boys’ changing stall. Dressing was quick for men. By the time I’d decided what order to do my warmup exercises in, I was done. *Big blue sea, here I come!*

“Oh, it’s Orimura!”

“No way! Already?! My swimsuit isn’t too weird, is it? It’ll be fine, right?”

“Oh wow! He looks great! He’s so cut!”

“Orimura! Let’s play some volleyball later!” a girl cried out to me.

“Sure, if I have time.”

Just barely out of the stall, I ran into a few of the girls who must have been using the neighboring ones. Their swimsuits were all cute, if a little bit awkwardly revealing. Eventually... I took my first step onto the sand, and in the same moment, the sand on which the July sun pounded down scorched the soles of my feet.

“Ow, that’s hot!”

It’d been many years since I’d been to the sea, and the sensation was nostalgic, even enjoyable. Yes, it wouldn’t be the sea without this. Tiptoeing across the dunes, I made my way to the water’s edge. The beach was already full of girls, some tanning, some playing volleyball, and some already swimming. Their swimsuits were a rainbow of colors, and shone brighter than the July sun in their own way.

“All right.” I started on my warmups. It’d been so long since I’d been to the sea, it’d be a shame if I got a leg cramp and drowned.

“Okay, stretch my arms, stretch my legs, stretch my back!”

“I-chi-ka!”

Huh? Wait— What?!

“Why’re you taking this so seriously? I mean, really, warmups for a swim? Hurry it up, I wanna get in the water!” Rin suddenly leapt onto me. Be it middle school or even in elementary school, put her in a swimsuit and she’d do this kind of thing. Just like a cat. Oh, and her swimsuit was a sporty tankini. It had orange and white stripes, and the top was cut high enough to show off her belly button.

“C’mon, do your warmups. I don’t want you drowning.”

“I’m not gonna drown. I think I was a mermaid in a past life.”

As we argued, she clambered up onto my shoulders. Mermaid? More like a cat, or maybe a monkey. Oh, and did you know, the first drawings of merpeople were actually mermen?

“I’m up so high! I can see forever! You make a great watchtower, Ichika.”

You’re welcome. I was just thinking about how I needed a job. Maybe this would work. *Wait, not like this!*

“Watchtower? Not even lookout?”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s useful, isn’t it?”

“And who’s gonna climb me every day, then?”

“Hmm... Me?” Rin answered with a chuckle. Ugh, what’s gotten into her?

“Ah, ahh, ahhh! What on earth are you doing?” Cecilia arrived with a question. She held a beach umbrella and towel, as well as a bottle of tanning oil. Hers was a vivid blue bikini. The sarong wrapped around her hips added a touch of class. Honestly, she looked like a model. The emphasis her swimsuit placed on her swelling breasts was more provocative than I’d expected, and I struggled to make eye contact.

“Riding his shoulders, duh. Or if you’d rather, we’re playing watchtower.”

“I’ve never heard of that game.”

“Well, what else could it be? I’m not qualified as a life preserver.”

“I... I can’t argue with that.”

“Like, totally. I mean, if someone was drowning, I’d try to help them, but...”

“Stop ignoring me, you two!”

Huh, that ended up being a completely vertical conversation. Oh, and as for why I was fine with Rin perching on me like this—well, I’d never tell her this to her face, but it was because she had no breasts. Also, she’d been doing it since elementary school, so I was just used to it.

“Anyway! Rin, get down from there!”

“I don’t wanna.”

“Why are you acting like such a child?!” Cecilia planted her umbrella in the sand with an audible crunch. No need to get so heated Cecilia, leave it to the sun instead.

“What’s going on? Is there a fight or something?”

“Hey, wait! Someone’s riding on Ichika’s shoulders!”

“Ooh! I wish it was me!”

“Let’s take turns!”

“First come, first served!”

A crowd of chattering girls had gathered, under the mistaken impression that I’d give them a shoulder ride. Oh, no... This wasn’t good. I wouldn’t be able to handle that many. Not physically, not mentally, and not as a man.

“Rin. Could you get down before anyone else gets the wrong idea?”

“Mmm. Guess I have to.” Rin hopped down from my shoulders, somersaulting forward as she landed. She really was like a cat.

“Ling? Wasn’t that just against the rules?” Cecilia grit her teeth into a forced smile. She must be mad. Meanwhile, I was busy explaining to the other girls that they couldn’t actually take turns on my shoulders. This was all Rin’s fault.

“Wasn’t Cecilia here for something from you, too? So we all should get a turn, right?”

“No, I...”

“What, you weren’t about to? Okay, then I’d like—”

“I-I was! Ichika, hurry and oil me up!”

“EHHH?”

Just as I was clearing up the misconception, Cecilia set them off again. Ugh, why’d she have to be so loud about it?

“I’ll get the tanning oil!”

“I’ll get a beach towel!”

“And I’ll get an umbrella!”

“I’ll rinse my tanning oil off!”

You already had some on, why make more work for me? Ah, dammit, you’re already in the water. Come on... Anyway, the group that gathered because of Rin dispersed because of Cecilia.

“Ahem. If you could be so kind as to get started.” Cecilia unwrapped and dropped her sarong. Somehow, it came off as extremely sexy, and my heart started to pound.

“Er, just your back, right?”

“If you’d like to oil my front, I’m fine with that, too.”

“Just your back. Please.”

“Very well, then.” Cecilia suddenly reached back to untie the string holding her top up, and layed down while covering her breasts

with her beach towel. "Go ahead."

"Of course."

I was left looking at Cecilia's bare back, as her top was held up only by the weight of her towel pressing it to her chest. Sideboobs squeezed out from below her arms. This was really, really sexy... Maybe it was just because she was lying down, but her butt, which was already firm and round like a woman's, stuck up as well. I hadn't realized earlier because of her sarong, but her bottoms were also a very skimpy cut. I involuntarily gulped as I looked down at her curvy legs.

"Okay, I'm starting now."

"Eek! Ichika, let it warm up a little in your hands first."

"Oh, okay. Sorry. I've just never done this before."

"Oh, I see. This is your first time? I suppose it makes sense."

For some reason, she sounded happy about that. I must have been imagining things. Anyway, I let the oil warm a bit in my palms before putting it on. After it was less chilly, I began to spread it on Cecilia's back. *Wow, her skin's so smooth. It feels really nice.*

"Mmm... That feels good. Can you get a little lower?"

"I thought you just wanted your back done."

"Well, you've already started, so can you get everywhere I can't reach? My legs, too. And my behind."

"Your wha—"

Oh no. This wasn't good. Even if it was because I was rubbing her with tanning oil, I couldn't touch her butt.

"Don't worry, I'll get you nice and oiled up!"

"Eek! Rin? What are you doing! That's cold!"

"What's wrong with that? You'll tan just as well either way. Here goes!"

"Ugh, that's enough! Knock it off—" Cecilia, angered, stood up. At the same time, the swimsuit she'd untied fell to the sand.

"Ah..."

"KYAAAAAA!" Cecilia barely managed to cover up, but her face and ears still burned a bright red.

"Ah, so sorry."

"And now you apologize, Ling? I'll make you pay for this!"

"Then I'll run away. Smell you later."

**Gulp.**

"Hey! Don't get me involved in this! Ugh, dammit... Sorry, Cecilia! I didn't see anything, okay?!" I pleaded.

"Wha—" Cecilia glowed an even brighter red, but unable to move her hands from where they were, she froze up. Meanwhile, Rin dragged me away toward the sea.

"Whoa! Rin, what are you doing?!"



“Race you to that buoy, Ichika. If I win, you owe me a parfait from @Cruise by the station. Ready— Go!”

“Hey, no fair! Wait up!”

“Ahahaha. Your fault for not paying attention!”

And that was how I got dragged into chasing after Rin. After all, the cheapest parfait at @Cruise was 1,500 yen. I literally couldn’t afford to lose.



*Sorry to be so mean, Cecilia, but it’s my turn.* Rin thought to herself as she raced Ichika. The plan she came up with last month, when she woke up early to make sweet-and-sour pork, had been a complete failure. She’d never expected Houki and even Cecilia to cook for him, too. *That was a really good plan, too.* When she’d thought it up, it went something like:

[Don’t heat Ichika’s portion.]



[Wait for him to want warm sweet-and-sour pork.]



[“Guess we’ll have to share.”]



[“Say ‘ahh.’”]

But it didn’t go well at all. Sure, she’d managed to feed him the pork, but it was after Houki took her turn, so it felt like just an afterthought. At the same time, she’d also only bought rice for herself, hoping for something like:

[“Can I have some rice, too?”]



[“Guess we’ll have to share.”]



[“Say ‘ahh.’”]

But since Houki made a lunch box, that had failed, too. *Really, though, it’s skin-to-skin contact that gets through to guys, and Ichika knows that if I’m in a swimsuit, I’ll be all over him.* At the same time, though, his obliviousness around girls was a worry in its own right. *It’s okay! No one else has the guts to get this close to him! Though Cecilia was a close call...*

Rin thought back to moments before. *Tanning oil, huh... Ichika did kind of look like he realized something was up. Maybe I should ask him to do my back after this.* It may have been Cecilia’s idea first, but there

was no reason it couldn't work for her. *He'd have to touch me, though. I don't mind touching people, but being touched... It's kind of embarrassing...* She ducked her face under the waves to cool off her rapidly-reddening blush. However, this didn't stop her heart from beating even faster.

*Ugh... I bet all the other girls are going to be after him too...* Her sigh bubbled to the surface and was washed away. *Get a hold of yourself, Huang Lingyin! You made it into IS Academy, you can't give up now!* She took a deep breath to match her newfound determination. However, she was still underwater. What rushed into her mouth wasn't fresh air, but rather seawater.

"Graaak!"

Surprised, she panicked and slipped under the water. *I'm under water! I need to go up!* But she couldn't tell which way was up. Rin was drowning, but then, a strong arm wrapped around her and pulled her to safety. *Ichika... This must be Ichika's arm...* Suddenly, she was filled with a sense of relief. Holding on to that muscular arm, she floated to the surface.





“Rin! Are you okay?!”

Rin coughed up water, “I’m fine...”

“Jeez, I told you. You needed to do your warmups.”

“That isn’t the problem! It’s your fault!”

“Huh? Anyway, let’s head back to shore. C’mon.”

I couldn’t really make out what she was saying, but it’d be better for her to be back on dry land. I turned my back to Rin.

“What?!”

“Get on. I’ll carry you.”

“It’s fine. I can make it back.”

It didn’t matter what she said, I couldn’t just leave someone who was half-drowned behind. This time I insisted a bit more firmly.

“Rin.”

“Hmph. Fine...”

This time, she listened. Picking her delicate form up out of the water, I began to swim back toward land.

A long time ago, Chifuyu had taught me how to swim while carrying someone. It was tough. You had to hold your back higher than you’d think to keep them from dipping under.

“Hit me on the shoulder if any water gets in your mouth. If you open it to talk, you’ll drown.”

“Mm.” As she gave a closed-mouth response, I swam toward the shore. Going too fast would be dangerous, so I took it slow. “Er, Ichika...”

“You’ll swallow more water if you talk.”

“It’s fine. Anyway, um...” She spoke quietly, softly, but I heard her last word as clear as a bell. “Thanks...”

She must have been embarrassed, talking to someone who’d just saved her from drowning. I responded with a nod, and began to carry her up onto the beach.

“I’m fine. I can walk the rest of the way.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. C’mon, let me down.”

As I walked out of the waves, a group of girls approached me. Rin squirmed, perhaps out of embarrassment at being seen while she was carried.

“Okay, I’ll let you down. Take it slow, though. A fall wouldn’t be good for you, even if you were a cat in a past life.”

“I was a mermaid, not a cat...”

Sure, whatever. I squatted to let Rin down.

“I think I’m just going to sit down for a bit.” Rin stumbled off

toward the beach house. Her face was a bit red following the events that just transpired. Ah well, I couldn't blame her for feeling awkward after what she said earlier.

"Oh, Ichika. That's where you went."

Hearing my name called, I turned around to see Charl and—

"Huh? Who's the towel ghost?" That was certainly a strange sight. Whoever it was was wrapped in bath towels from the top of her head all the way to below her knees. Who on earth could it be?

"C'mon out. It's fine."

"I'll be the one who decides when it's fine..."

Hm? That voice... Was it Laura? She was normally so confident, I could hardly believe that timid voice was hers. Charl, being her usual self, was trying to convince Laura of something. I hadn't the foggiest what.

"Come on, you went through all the effort to change into that swimsuit, and you're not even going to let him see it?"

"W-Wait! I'm not ready yet..."

"Jeez. You keep saying that, and you've wrapped yourself up like a mummy all day. I helped you out, I don't know why you think you should hide it from me."

Oh, by the way, Charl and Laura had ended up in the same room. Even though they'd fought fiercely in the incident last month, they got along fine as roommates. No matter how standoffish Laura was, I guess being with a girl as positive and friendly as Charl opened her up a bit.

"Anyway, if you're going to stay wrapped up, maybe I'll just go hang out with Ichika by myself."

"What?!"

"Hm, yeah, that sounds like a great idea. Let's go, Ichika." As she spoke, Charl took my hand. With our arms linked, she began to pull me back toward the water.

"W-Wait. I'll go too."

"Dressed like that?"

"Fine, fine, I'll take them off!"

A pile of towels fell to the sand, and Laura's swimsuit-clad body stepped into the light. Her swimsuit was—

"Go ahead, laugh!"

—Black, but decorated with lace frills. At first glance, it looked like a grown-up's sexy lingerie. Her hair, normally left unstyled, was pulled up into tails on either side of her head. She almost looked like Rin that way—but more importantly, she looked adorable. Seeing her nervous and uptight for once just reinforced it.

"There's nothing weird about it, right, Ichika?"

"Oh, of course. I was a little surprised, but I think it looks good on

her.”

“Wh—?!” Laura didn’t seem to be expecting that response, and she wavered for a moment before turning beet-red. “I don’t need to be lied to.”

“No, it’s not just flattery. Right, Charl?”

“Yeah. I told her so too, but she doesn’t want to believe it. Oh, by the way, I helped Laura put her hair up. She doesn’t dress up often, so I thought it’d be nice to go all the way.”

“Oh, really? By the way, your swimsuit looks great, too.”

“Oh, thanks.” Charl twisted a lock of hair around her finger as she shied away from the praise. The bracelet I’d bought her yesterday glimmered on her wrist.

“You’re sure that won’t degrade?”

“It’s fine. I put a protective coating on it, and I’ll wash it off right after. It’s a gift from you, after all.” Charl giggled as she smiled. She really did seem to like it a lot.

“Ichika.”

“Hm?”

Laura’s voice was clearer than before, as if she’d gotten over her worries.

“That’s no fair. I... I want a present too...”

I’d expected Cecilia to be jealous, but not Laura, too.

“Sure, the next time you have something to celebrate. Your birthday, maybe?”

“I see. I’ll be expecting something then. You’d better not forget.”

“Okay. But it won’t be anything too expensive. I mean, I am just a schoolkid.”

“Very well. Three months’ wages, perhaps? My squadmates tell me that’s standard for a present of that sort in Japan.”

The girl with all the wrong ideas about Japan must have given Laura some bad advice again. Well, ‘wrong’ wasn’t the proper word so much as ‘inappropriate.’

“Is there something you want? I don’t really see you wearing much jewelry.”

“I suppose. I’m not particularly accustomed to it. But... if it’s something you choose, I think I’d love it.”

“Oh? Hmm, I wonder what would work best? A choker, maybe? Or your hairstyle now is off your ears, earrings would look good. I think they’d make you look cute.”

“C-Cute?!” Her new hairstyle must have had her on edge. She flusteredly intertwined her fingers.

“Orimura!”

“You promised you’d play volleyball!”

“Yay, I get to play with Orimu!”

A nearby girl was making a ball-spiking gesture. It was the one I made a promise to before, her friend, and Miss Casual again. I realized I really needed to start remembering peoples' names.

"There! Passing to Orimura!"

She gave the ball a slap and sent it flying my way. I caught it, and quickly set up teams.

"All right, if Charl and Laura are on my team, it's a fair three-on-three. Let's get started!"

As soon as I called it out, the two girls spread the net while Miss Casual drew the lines in the sand. Wow, she was slow.

"All right, ground rules. Shoot by your third hit, no spiking twice in a row, ten points decides the set."

"Okay. You serve first."

I tossed the beach ball over. The girl who was setting up to serve had a gleam in her eye. *I think her name was... Kushinada?*

"Hehehe. I'll show you why they call me the July Summer Devil!"

Whew! A jumping serve straight off! It was fast, and she had a good angle on it, too. I couldn't do anything.

"Got it!," Charl called out. She really was the class ace, in more ways than one. *I'll have to tell her that later.*

"Whoa!"

I heard a thud, and then Charl cry out. Turning around, I saw that Laura, who'd been staring off into space until then, had suddenly shoved Charl out of the way to return the serve.

"Are you okay?!"

"Oww... What was that, Laura?"

"He... He said I was cute... Wow..."

As our eyes made contact, her expression emptied and she blushed. Then, she darted away like a startled rabbit.

"Uh... Hey, Laura! What are you doing?!" I called out to her, but by the time the words left my mouth she was already inside the beach house. Me, Charl, and a speechless trio remained.

"Well, well. Looks like it's Orimura the Heartbreaker in action." Miss Casual broke the ice. By the way, she was wearing something that was less of a swimsuit and more of mascot costume; it covered her whole body up to her ears. Tabane and her would probably have a lot to talk about, fashion-wise.

"Well. Anyway, let's keep playing. We can check on Laura later."

"Agreed!"

Thus continued a game of two-on-three—though Miss Casual may as well have not counted—beach volleyball.

"There!"

Charl nimbly moved in for a spike. As I watched out of the corner of my eye, I noticed her breasts bouncing as she jumped. *Dammit! Why*

*didn't I ever notice how curvy she really—Ugh, no!* Once I saw it, I couldn't unsee it. The breasts of the other team were bouncing whenever they jumped, too.

“.....”

“What's wrong, Ichika?”

“No! Uh, it's nothing! Nothing at all!”

As I wondered whether they'd noticed me staring, my heart leapt into my throat. Trying to deflect attention, I began waving my hands around. Watching me, Charl gave a bemused grin.

“Hehe. You're so silly, Ichika.”

“Well, it's summer! Gotta get warmed up!”

“That was pretty weak, even for you.”

She really wasn't putting up with my jokes lately. That ‘I know what you're thinking, Ichika’ felt like getting scolded by a neighbor as a kid. Pretty embarrassing.

“It's getting close to lunchtime. What are you doing this afternoon, Ichika?”

“I want to swim a bit more, but it's a bad idea right after eating. I think I'll just relax for a bit.”

“Oh? Let's go get lunch, then. Oh, hey, by the way, which room did you end up in?”

“I want to know too!”

“Me three!”

“I'd like to know where to find a cool pillow.” The rest of the team was confused by that one from Miss Casual.

“Uh, Ms. Orimura's room.”

At once, their excitement turned to ice, as if the sudden reveal jolted their train of thought off the tracks.

“Ah, so it's dangerous to come hang out.”

“That's right... But we can still see you at meals!”

“Yeah! No need to go raiding the demon's lair.”

“And who are you calling a demon?” Her entrance rang like a gong. I'm not even sure it was my imagination. All three of the girls craned their necks around in terror.

“M-Miss... Orimura...”

“Yep.”

Ah. She was wearing the swimsuit from before. It was black like Laura's, but gave a completely different impression, proudly highlighting each and every curve on her body in the bright sunlight. Honestly, if she wasn't my sister, my heart would have jumped out of my mouth right then. Even the hand on her hip, usually so strict, came off as sexy. Between that and her model-like good looks, the rest of the girls were completely outclassed. It was hard to imagine when they were held in by a suit, but now, even an unfavorable observer



would have to admit that her breasts were bigger than average. And that swimsuit was designed to draw eyes directly to her cleavage and keep them trapped there.



“Stop leering, Ichika...”

“Charl?! What are you talking about?” I tried to laugh it off.

“You were just practically drooling.”

Ugh. I couldn’t really argue with that.

“Hurry up and go have lunch.”

“What about you, Ms. Orimura?”

“I’m going to enjoy the little bit of free time that I have.”

She was right. The teachers had almost no unscheduled time, so I didn’t want to waste any more of it than I had to.

“All right, we’ll go get lunch then.”

“Don’t be late coming back.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

With that, we left the beach. It was just past noon, so plenty of other students were leaving, too.

“Did you see Ms. Orimura’s swimsuit? It looked great! She looks so awesome in it.”

“I’m jealous.”

“Keep being jealous, because you aren’t ever gonna be like that.”

“I-I won’t know until I try!”

Everyone was excited. Hearing a family member being praised was like being tickled, I didn’t know whether to laugh or be nervous. They were right, though. It did look good on her. She looked awesome. Like a model—no, better than a model.

“Ichika, is Ms. Orimura your type?”

“My... Huh? Why are you asking me that all of a sudden, Charl?”

“Oh, no reason in particular. I just thought you were looking at her a lot differently than you looked at us.”

Was Charl... Mad? But why?

“Looks like I have a lot of rivals. And not easy ones, either. Especially if Ms. Orimura is on the list.”

Yeah, she was definitely tough. Last month we saw her wielding an IS blade with her bare hands. How much skill and how much strength must that take?

“Yeah, she really is amazing.”

“I’m not sure you understood what I meant, Ichika.”

“Eh? Really?”

“Really. Definitely. Sigh... Sometimes I think you, yourself, are the toughest one.”

Huh, really? Honestly, I’d rather not spar with her if I could avoid it. We’d teamed up before, so she knew all my tricks.

“Oh well, no sense in thinking too hard about it. C’mon, Ichika. Let’s go!”

“Sure.”

I didn't really understand why, but it seemed like her mood had passed, as she took my hand and led me toward the beach house to change. Sure, I wanted to swim again later, but who would go get lunch in their swim trunks?

"I wonder what's for lunch? We're at the ocean, maybe we'll get sashimi."

"Sashimi! That sounds great, I love it when it's fresh."

It seemed like Charl had really taken to Japanese culture. If it was Cecilia, she'd be complaining about how unthinkable it was to eat fish without cooking it. And Laura, on the other hand, would go "Don't worry. I'm trained in jungle survival, I know what I can eat raw safely." *It's not like that, Laura.* Speaking of which... I realized I hadn't seen Houki all morning. Didn't she go down to the beach? She's a great swimmer, I wonder why not. As I thought about that, I split from Charl to go to the boys' changing stall.



In seemingly no time at all, it had become half past seven. I was eating dinner in the banquet hall, which was composed of three separate wings.

"This is great! It's awesome that we get sashimi for lunch and dinner."

"Yeah. They really spare no expense at IS Academy."

Charl, sitting to my right, nodded as she spoke. Like everyone else here, Charl was wearing a yukata. I didn't really understand why, but it seemed to be a resort rule.

"Yukata are required while dining."

*Isn't it usually the other way around?* The first year students, packed together in straight rows, were all kneeling, as was proper for a tatami room. Each had a small table placed before them. The menu was sashimi, a simple hot pot, and two different wild vegetable salads. There was also dashi red miso soup and a quick pickle medley. Now, this all may sound completely average, but the sashimi: it was filefish. It even had the liver left in. I couldn't believe it. My tongue silently bathed in its unique mouthfeel and mild taste. Even the liver was simply rich, rather than gamey or off. I was beginning to understand why it had become so popular lately.

"This is really good. It even has real wasabi. I'm amazed that they're actually feeding this to high schoolers," I said aloud.

"Real wasabi?"

"Oh, didn't you know? It's the kind grated straight from the root."

"Eh? Then what's the stuff we get when they have sashimi at the dining hall at school?"

"Oh, that's prepared wasabi. That stuff's normally made with

horseradish. They just dye it to look like the real thing.”

“Hmm. So this is the real deal?”

“Yeah. Though prepared wasabi’s gotten pretty good lately, too. Some restaurants even mix it with the real stuff.”

“Huh.”

She took a bite. *Wait, Charl, did you really just eat that whole mound of wasabi?*

“MMPH!”

Yep, she really did. Now she was pinching her nose as tears streamed down her face. I couldn’t believe she just did that...

“Are you okay?”

“Hm fnnh...” As she spoke in a nasal voice, Charl tried to keep up a relaxed grin, but her tears belied her efforts. “It... It’s certainly flavorful... It’s delicious... I think?”

*Sometimes she tries way too hard.*

“Ugh...”

Oh, and Cecilia, sitting to my left, had been groaning like this all meal. It seemed like she wasn’t at all used to kneeling. She had hardly eaten her food.

“Are you okay, Cecilia? You don’t look well.”

“I... I’m perfectly fine...”

She definitely didn’t seem fine. Was kneeling that difficult for her? She was trembling harder and harder, but something—maybe her pride as an Englishwoman—still made her take her chopsticks to hand.

“I suppose... I’ll try...”

Her slow gulps made it clear that she was having difficulty even with the soup. Speaking of which, since IS Academy took applications from all around the world, the students and teachers around me were a very diverse group. Even the wall of yukatas around me was broken up by blonde hair here, silver hair there, brown skin and blue eyes. It almost felt like I could take a world tour without leaving the room. *Nah, not really.*

“It... It’s quite good...”

A smile slowly appeared on her face. Wow, she really looked like she was forcing herself.

“You don’t have to keep kneeling, Cecilia. Why don’t you go to a table? Plenty of other girls from our class have. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

Since there were so many nationalities, races, and religions represented, they’d thought to provide an adjoining room with tables for those who had difficulty eating while kneeling. The small tables we had also separated into a frame and a serving tray, so anyone who wanted to move could just bring their food with them.

“I’ll endure. It’s nothing at all compared to what I went through to get my hands on this seat.”

Hm? What did she mean by ‘get my hands on this seat’? I thought we just sat down in the order we walked in. Was I wrong?

“Ichika, there are things girls have to deal with.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

I guess she was right. Speaking of which, where was Houki? Oh, there she was, sitting at the far end of the next row. You could tell she was raised in a dojo by how straight she held her back even eating while kneeling. She was carrying on a lively conversation with classmates, and didn’t notice me looking. It was no real surprise that she looked amazing in a yukata. Was this what they meant when they talked about the flower of Japanese womanhood?

“Oh, Orimura! Hey!”

The girl next to Houki noticed me and waved her hand. At once, Houki’s expression changed from enjoyment to a steely glare in my direction. I could just tell she wanted to shout over, “Stop leering at girls, you creep!” I gave a halfhearted wave back, and went back to my dinner. They’d probably have a hard time eating if I kept staring at them.

And hey, where did Tabane go, anyway? After all the fanfare of her entrance, she’d disappeared completely. I still didn’t really understand what went through her head.

“Ughhh...”

And then there was Cecilia. It really seemed like she couldn’t handle kneeling at all. She’d just dropped her sashimi twice.

“Cecilia?”

“I am not going to move.”

She shot me down before I could even ask.

“You’re not managing to get any food down, though. Should I feed you? I did it for Charl befo—”

“Ichika!” yelled out Charl.

“S-Sorry...”

Whoops, I let it slip out. It must still have been embarrassing for her to have been fed because she couldn’t use chopsticks. I quickly covered my mouth and apologized.

“Is this true, Ichika?!”

Wow, Cecelia seemed really interested. How could I change the subject?

“Well, Charl was sick that day, and—”

“I don’t care what you did or didn’t do for Charlotte! J-Just... Will you really feed me?!”

“Err, sure, I don’t mind. By the time your legs calm down your

food would probably get cold, otherwise. And the sashimi's filefish. It'd be a shame to let it shrivel up."

"Ah, of course! Yes, yes! Allowing such a wonderful meal to spoil would be an insult to the chef!"

That was definitely true. You couldn't just take for granted that someone would be there cooking for you. If you forgot to be grateful, you weren't even human.

"Very well, then. Shall we begin?" Cecilia handed me her chopsticks as she spoke. I took them and immediately picked up a piece of sashimi.

"Are you okay with wasabi, Cecilia?"

"I suppose, if it's a little bit..."

So not very okay, then. That was a shame, it was good.

"Here goes."

"Okay. Ahh..."

Just as she was about to bite down, though, trouble started.

"Hey! Hey, wait! No fair, Cecilia! What are you doing?!"

"She's getting fed by Orimura! What a cheater!"

"No fair! That's playing dirty! What a minx!"

Ugh, it looked like the other girls saw us. I shouldn't have been surprised by that, though. We were all sitting in straight rows, it wasn't like it was that hard.

"Why, this is perfectly fair! It's simply a privilege of sitting by his side."

"That's exactly what isn't fair!"

"Orimura, feed me, too!"

Suddenly, I was almost crushed under an avalanche of girls seizing the opportunity to experience it for themselves. They needed to cool it. It was pretty obvious that they could all eat by themselves.

"Hurry!"

"Ahh!"

The girls crowded in further. What were they, baby birds?

"Can't you all even quiet down when you eat?" A voice rang out, and the room froze in place.

"Ms. Orimura..."

"Looks like you've all got a lot of excess energy. Very well. How's an after-dinner run on the beach sound? Let's go for a distance of, hmm... fifty kilometers seems about right."

"Oh, no, no! It's fine! We'll be quiet now!"

The girls rushed back to their seats. After watching them, Chifuyu turned to look at me.

"Orimura, you need to start less trouble. It's a pain to clean up after you."

"Understood."

Was it really my fault? I guess so.

“So, uh, Cecilia. I’m sorry, but—”

“.....”

Her face had the poutiest pout I’d ever seen. If you typed out the sound you’d imagine it making, you’d have to put at least four tildes on the end.

“Er, ah...”

“No, no, I understand. You certainly value your sister’s opinions very highly.”

Sigh. Looks like she was mad— Oh, right.

“I’ll make up for it, Cecilia. Come to my room later.” As I almost whispered it, Cecilia blinked in confusion.

“Your room? Then, that means—” Suddenly, she clasped my hand between hers and murmured back intensely. “Of course! I understand! Simply give me a short time to prepare!”

Prepare? Prepare for what? As I wondered what she meant, Cecilia seemingly sprang back to life as she devoured her meal. I guess she’d gotten used to kneeling. That was nice, at least.

“Ah, it’s all so wonderful!”

She was definitely hyped up about something. And, I mean, it was good food. I understood where she was coming from. What was this hot pot seasoned with? Ginger, Japanese pepper, and... Hmm. I couldn’t quite make it out. It had a deep, rich flavor, so delicious it made me curious. I guess I was growing more and more domestic as time went on. As I hemmed and hawed over the ingredients, before I noticed, I’d eaten until my stomach was full.



“Ahh, that hit the spot.”

After eating, I went to the hot spring. It was incredibly luxurious. I was in quite the good mood as I returned to my room, after having an open-air bath that looked out over the sea all to myself. *Ah, I guess Chifuyu went to bathe too?* She wasn’t in the room, so it was probably a safe assumption. Wait— Speak of the devil. Or demon, as may be...

“Aww, you’re alone? You’re going to bore me to death if you don’t try to sneak at least one girl in here.”

“I told you— Oh, never mind. Forget it.”

This room was still pretty much Ms. Orimura’s. It might well have caught up with me later if I’d tried anything indecent. Oh, and it seemed like she had been to the hot springs, as her hair was still wet. Even though she was my sister, seeing glossy black hair like that made my pulse speed up.

“Hey, Chifuyu.”

**Thunk.** A sharp chop bounced off my head.



“Call me Ms. Orimura.”

“C’mon, it’s fine. There’s only the two of us, and we just got out of the bath, and besides, it’s been forever—”



“Hm-hmhm~♪”

Cecilia hummed happily to herself as she dressed, following a relaxing post-dinner bath and shower. She’d put the resort’s yukata back on, but underneath it was a different set of underwear. *Well, it certainly didn’t hurt to be prepared!* A confident smile spread over her face as she thought to herself. Cecilia’s classmates, though, couldn’t help noticing her confidence and excitement.

“Did something good happen, Cecilia?”

“Oh, nothing!”

“It... sure doesn’t seem like nothing.”

“Oh, is that so?” she giggled. “Fine, whatever. What a disappointment this trip is, though. I came all ready to have some fun with Orimura, but he’s staying with the demon, so...”

The surrounding girls nodded in shared disappointment.

By the way, the resort’s suites were set up with games from playing cards to Uno, hanafuda to Life, and even what every boy—or in this case, every girl—wanted an excuse to play: Twister. Some things didn’t change, even in the 21st century. *Not that I need to waste my time playing games tonight.* Cecilia continued humming as she sprayed on a light perfume. Her beautiful hair, full of body, was at least 20% more gorgeous than normal.

“Ooh! Ceci’s wearing her grown-up panties!”

Miss Casual may have spent most of her time with her eyes half closed, but it clearly did nothing to dull her perceptiveness. Hearing those words, even Cecilia couldn’t help letting out a nervous yelp. After all...

“Oh really? Lemme see!”

“Take it off! Take it all off!”

“Eek! Stop it, don’t yank!”

The old saying was that ‘three women make a market,’ so a suite with nine girls was practically an auction house; especially with all the pent-up energy and newfound free time from not having Ichika to play with. Cecilia knew all too well just how fired up and ready to jump on any distraction they were.

“Oh wow! Those are so sexy!”

“Dirty, dirty!”

“Why are you wearing your date panties, anyway? It’s not like you’re gonna get in to see Orimura.”

“Well, well. Little Cecilia’s grown up for her age.”

Each girl had their own take, but eventually they settled on one shared opinion.

**“Cecilia, you’re so naughty!”**

“I am certainly not ‘naughty’! This... This is just what quality lingerie looks like!” Cecilia blushed and rewrapped her yukata as she fired back, praying in her heart that no one realized she’d been invited to Ichika’s room alone.

“You sure did take your time washing up, though.”

***Twitch.***

“You showered afterward, and you even put makeup back on.”

***Twitch, twitch.***

“Are you sure you’re not up to something?”

“I very much am not! This is simply how any proper woman should take care of themselves. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a prior engagement!”

She stood as she attempted to cut off the line of conversation. *Once I make it out that door, he’s as good as mine!* Or so she thought, but...

***Sniff, sniff.***

“That isn’t your usual perfume. Is that Leliel No. 6? Wow, that’s the really good stuff!” As they heard Miss Casual speak, the other girls’ faces twisted. It was over. Over before she even realized it. The other girls had already latched on.

“Leliel No. 6? I heard that cost tens of thousands of yen a spray!”

“Isn’t that the one they only make a few hundred bottles of a year? And every one has a serial number?”

“You really have one? Let me see it!”

“Well, I don’t mind showing you, but perhaps we could save it for —”

“*No way!*” Cecilia sighed internally as the other girls grabbed onto her arms. It was a firm grip, one she was sure they wouldn’t relax easily.

“Where’d you get this?! I’ve heard you can’t even walk into a store and buy it!”

“A relative has an acquaintance at Leliel.”

“Wow! You really are loaded!”

“It’s not so much me as my family.”

“Let me smell it!”

“I don’t even mind if you try it on, but I really must be going now.”

“*No way!*” Cecilia sighed internally, as the cycle began again.

“That’s such a waste, though!”

“You already put it on, we’ll just sniff you!”

“Sniff! Sniff!”

The girls spread their arms as they stepped forward. Cecilia, realizing the trouble she was in, backpedaled, only to soon find a wall.

“Hehehe. You’re not getting away.”

“Now, lie back and let us sniff you!”

“This is gonna be fun!”

Step by step, the girls closed in, Their eyes gleaming with a strange light.

“N-NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”



“Ugh, that was terrible...”

Cecilia, thoroughly worked over, stumbled out into the hallway without a moment to catch her breath. *But now I can go to Ichika’s room*— The mere thought made the exhaustion and the frustration fall from her shoulders. In no more than 10 seconds, her clothes were fixed. *I should clear my throat, too. Mhm!* Her bliss was mirrored by the spring in her step, as she nearly skipped down the hall to her destination. But...

“.....”

“.....”

Two girls stood by the door to the room.

“Ling? And Houki? What on earth are—”

“Ssh!” Ling hushed Cecilia swiftly. As she stood in confusion by the door, she heard voices from inside.

“*We haven’t done it in so long. Are you nervous?*”

“*Of course not, you idiot— Mm! B-Be a little bit gentler...*”

“*Okay. How about... here?*”

“*Ah! Wait, no, not—*”

“*It’ll feel good soon. It’s been so long since the last time we did this.*”

“*Ahhn!*”

“Whatever could they...” Cecilia’s lips trembled as she forced them into a smile and asked. But she was answered with only silence.

“.....”

Ling and Houki had empty stares. The stares of those who were completely drained.

“*Now I’m going to—*”

“*Wait, Ichika.*”

Their voices cut off as the trio pressed their ears to the door in eager curiosity...

**Bam!**

“BWAH!” The door slammed open. The moment it was pushed, three teenage girls shouted in unison.

“What are you fools doing?”

“Aha... Hahaha....”

“Good evening, Ms. Orimura...”

“Good night, Ms. Orimura!”

They sped off like hares, but were caught almost immediately; Ling and Houki by the napes of their necks, Cecilia by a well-placed stomp on the hem of her yukata. They were no match for Chifuyu in IS combat, and even less so on foot.

“Eavesdropping is a nasty habit, but you have good timing. Step inside.”

“EHH?”

Their ears perked up at the unexpected invitation.

“Oh, but first, call the other two—Bodewig and Dunois.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am.” Ling and Houki, now set loose, scrambled to find them. Cecilia, meanwhile, adjusted her collar as she entered the room.

“Oh, hey, Cecilia. I was wondering when you’d get here. Let’s get started!”

Ichika patted the bed as he invited Cecilia in. Cecilia, shocked by the nonchalant and direct invitation, blushed.

“Er, um, your sister is here, so I’m not sure—”

“Huh? Nah, it’s fine. I’m all warmed up already, let’s get going.”

“I, er, I mean, the atmosphere isn’t quite...”

“Huh...?”

Ichika, not understanding what Cecilia couldn’t bring herself to say, simply made a strange face and patted the bed again. Nervously, she glanced over at Chifuyu, who silently stared back as if to say ‘Don’t mind me, go right ahead.’ *Well, I certainly have to mind you at least a little bit!* Still, this was getting nowhere. And since Chifuyu had called for Charlotte and Laura, things would be even worse if she waited. *Ugh... I suppose a girl needs determination!* Screaming in her heart, she laid down, half out of desperation. The pounding of her heart almost tore open her chest. She squeezed her eyes shut as her mind swirled between anticipation and fear.

“.....”

But, nothing happened. Surprised, she opened her left eye just to peek, and Ichika spoke.

“Cecilia, I can’t do this unless you lie on your front.”

“Eh? Eh? O-On my front?”

“Yeah.”

“I-I see...” Cecilia was momentarily put off as that certainly wasn’t what she’d read about, but soon she understood that perhaps that was how they did it in Japan.

“Anyway, here I go.”

“Yes! Oh, yes!”

She was too far gone to consider her response, let alone be

embarrassed by it. Waiting for the sensation of a hand on her back, Cecilia's heart pounded faster and faster toward its limits. And then—

“All right...”

**Poooooooooooooke.**

“Oww! Ichika! What are you— Ah!”

“What do you mean, ‘what?’ It’s shiatsu.”

“Shiatsu?”

“Yeah. For your back.”

“M-My back...” Cecilia blankly echoed Ichika’s words. “Ah, Ichika? Of all things, was this why you invited me to your room?”

“Yeah. I thought I’d give you a massage. And you’re in one of the suites, right? I didn’t think you could relax there, so I invited you here.”

A crow cried out. Deep in her heart, Cecilia wept.

“How awkward...”

“Eh? What’s wrong? Does it hurt that badly?”

“Extremely. As if I’m dying.”

“Oh, whoops. I’m sorry. I’ll be gentler.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore...”

Cecilia let out a deep, deep sigh, deeper than the darkest night. Alongside it, her face twisted into a blend of exhaustion and despair and resignation and self-mockery, as if her soul was trying to fight its way out of her body. Still, as the massage began, its comfort and the chance to talk with Ichika restored her spirits.

“Is that about right?”

“Yes... It feels good...”

Ichika’s thumbs worked the pressure points alongside her spine.

“Your back is so stiff, though. What have you been doing to yourself?”

“Mm. I’m a bit of a violinist. Ah, wait— That hurts a little.”

“Oh, sorry. I should try something other than shiatsu there, then.”

She felt his thumbs withdraw, to be replaced by the weight of the heel of his palm. The weight of the spread-out, rather than focused, massage relaxed her. Soon, it became pleasantly invigorating, and she unthinkingly let out a moan of pleasure.

“Ahh— Ichika, you’re quite good at this...”

“Well, I always used to give my sister massages.”

“And with the girls...”

Her voice, though condemning, was quiet enough for Ichika not to hear. Perhaps, because of the pleasant sensation of the massage, it carried no real anger. If anything, it was the typical teasing of a close friend, hoping to be indulged.

“All right, now I’m going to work your spine directly.”

“Yes... Go ahead...”

Her good mood and the comfort of the massage soon put Cecilia half to sleep. She relaxed, daydreaming.

“Is there anywhere you want me to work harder?”

“Why, wherever you feel needs it.”

“All right. I’ll try here first.”

Ichika pressed, firmly but gently, with the palm of his hands. He didn’t just press down, but also inward from Cecilia’s sides—in a pattern which not only relaxed her muscles, but carried her off to sleep. As he’d said himself, “A good massage makes you tired. It’s great if you can drift off during it, it’ll just carry your exhaustion away.” And he wasn’t wrong. A painful ‘massage’ may as well have just been torture. A real massage was as much about relaxation as working out knots. It invigorates the body and the soul.

*Mmm... I’m really sleepy...* The longer she let her thoughts drift, the better she felt. At the same time, she noticed the smell of a man—Ichika—in bed alongside her, and her heart silently leapt. *He smells nice...* Already half-asleep, she was about to let herself be carried off to Dreamland on that sweet scent. When suddenly—

***Squeeeeeeeze!***

“.....?!?!?!?”

Cecilia was yanked back to reality by a sudden pinch on her butt. *I-I-I-Ichika?! Even for a massage, that’s going too far!* Clutching her right hand to her pounding chest, she hesitantly turns around, and...

Chifuyu had wholeheartedly grabbed onto Cecilia’s butt. Her face was that of a successful prankster, but without one shred of innocent glee. Her grin was that of a panther. “I can’t believe you’re wearing panties like that at your age. And black ones, too?”

“Ah... Eeeeeek!”

As Chifuyu grabbed Cecilia’s butt from below, her yukata flipped up, revealing her hips and also the underwear in question. They were special date night panties, woven together from scant patches of lace. Each side was tied together with cord, for easier removal.

“.....” Ichika blushed deeply and turned away. It was obvious that he’d seen them. Cecilia, realizing this, was beyond embarrassed, and just wanted to find somewhere to hide.

“Ms. Orimura! Let go of me!” As she flushed bright red and shouted, Chifuyu unexpectedly did just that.

“Well, well. Only fifteen, and already trying for harlotry right under the nose of your teacher?”

“Ha-Harlotry?!”

“I was just kidding. You four out there— Feel free to come in.”

***Rattle, shuffle.***

“.....”

After a few seconds of silence, the door opened slowly. Standing outside were Houki, Ling, Charlotte, and Laura. Each was wearing one of the resort's yukata.

“Enough massaging for now, Ichika. Everyone, find a place to sit down.”

The four, waved in by Chifuyu, nervously entered. As instructed, they each found a place to sit—not that the options of bed or chair were that varied.

“Phew. I sure have worked up a sweat massaging two people in a row.”

“It's because you don't know when to back off. You need to be more efficient,” jeered Chifuyu.

“I'd feel like I was wasting the other person's time, then.”

“You're too honest for your own good.”

“It wouldn't kill you to praise me for once, would it?”

“Who knows? Maybe it would.”

The girls took in the scene as they followed the repartee. It soon became obvious that both Cecilia and Chifuyu had, when overheard, simply been massaged.

“Aha... Hahaha...”

“Well, I guess that makes sense.” Houki sighed out her tension, while Ling tried to seem in control.

“.....”

Meanwhile, Charlotte and Laura, who both seemed to have more detailed imaginings of what had been going on, were both bright red and looking down at the floor.

“Go take another bath. I don't want your sweat stinking up the room.”

“Mmm. Fine.” Ichika, nodding at Chifuyu's suggestion, took a towel and left the room. His last comment was “Just relax. Well... If you can.”

“.....”

And, just as he'd said, five girls remained sitting in nervous silence.

“What is this, a funeral? A wake? What happened to all that enthusiasm?” Chifuyu was the first to shatter the still air.

“Well, um...”

“We've never...”

“I don't think we've ever talked with you like this.”

“Okay, okay, fine. Drinks are on me. Shinonono, what do you want?”

Houki's shoulders trembled as she was singled out. Unable to answer, she squirmed in her seat. Chifuyu stood, opened the resort

minibar, and pulled out five cold drinks.

“Here. There’s one ramune, one orange juice, one sports drink, one coffee, and one black tea. Trade ‘em around until everyone’s happy.”

As she spoke, she handed them out in order to Houki, Charlotte, Ling, Laura, and Cecilia, who were each satisfied and felt no need to trade.

“T-Thank you very much.” Words of gratitude passed each pair of lips in one direction, shortly followed by cold drinks in the opposite. As each girl swallowed, Chifuyu broke out into a grin.

“So you drank it?”

“Er, yes?”

“Well, of course we did...”

“Did you put something in them?!”

“Have some gratitude. Plus, I wanted to make sure we were all in this together.” As she spoke, she pulled forth something else from the minibar: a can of beer with a shining star logo. Chifuyu pulled the tab, causing foam and droplets to fizz forth. Pressing the can to her lips, she chugged the contents down.

“.....”

As the others gasped, she sat down on the bed, self-satisfied.

“Hmm. It’d taste better with Ichika’s cooking, but I’m just gonna have to wait, aren’t I?”

The girls stared, not recognizing the person in front of them as the strict, by-the-book Ms. Orimura. Laura, especially, had been blinking in shock, as if she couldn’t believe her eyes.

“What’s with the faces? I’m human, aren’t I? Can’t a girl have a drink? Or did you expect me to crack open a can of 10W-40?”

“Well, it’s not...”

“Not like that, we just...”

“Just were thinking...”

“Thinking, aren’t you technically at work right now?”

Laura’s jaw was still hanging slack in shock. Rather than let out words, her mouth furiously chugged in coffee.

“C’mon, don’t be so cold. Besides, I thought I gave you a little something to keep everyone’s mouths shut.” Chifuyu looked around at the drinks in everyone’s hands as she grinned. The girls gasped as they finally realized what she meant. “Anyway, enough small talk. Let me get to the point.”

She motioned for Laura to get her another beer, which she cracked open, then continued.

“What do you like about him, anyway?”

Everyone knew exactly who ‘him’ referred to. It had to be Ichika.

“I’m just annoyed that he’s fallen behind on his practice,” Houki



answered as she tipped her ramune back.

"We always end up together, whether I like it or not," Rin muttered as she fiddled with the cap of her sports drink.

"As class representative, I want to make sure he's actually doing his best." Completely the opposite from before, Cecilia replied forcefully.

"I see. I guess I should tell him that."

As soon as the words left Chifuyu's mouth, the three startled, then leaned in.

"YOU DON'T HAVE TO!"

Chifuyu laughed off their reaction, and tipped her own beer back.

"I... Well, he's kind, and..." Charl, shyly and quietly, yet still firmly, gave her own answer.

"Oh? But he's kind to everyone."

"Well, yeah... Sometimes that bothers me." Even as she pretended to laugh it off, she fanned her burning cheeks. The three others stared silently at her, as if jealous or resentful.

"And what about you?" Chifuyu spoke to Laura, who'd been silent the whole time. Seemingly unprepared, she jerked to attention, trying to form words.

"I suppose... Because he's strong..."

"But he's weak."

A blunt rebuttal. Chifuyu spoke matter-of-factly, but Laura, for once, argued with her.

"He's strong. Stronger than me, at least."

"If you say so," Chifuyu began, as she finished her second beer. "Anyway, whether he's strong or not. He's certainly useful. He can clean, cook, and even give massages. Right, Alcott?"

Cecilia answered with a blushing nod.

"Anyway, I know just the kind of girl he's looking for. Wanna find out?"

The girls looked up at her in shock.

Nervously, Laura asked, "Will... Will you tell us?"

"Hahaha, of course not!"

The girls sighed internally.

"If you wanna be a woman, you've gotta learn to come and take it. Gotta step it up, kids." Chifuyu brought her third beer to her mouth, and broke out in a heartfelt grin.

## Chapter III: The Thin Red Line

The second day of our field trip, from morning to night, we were to be in our IS testing equipment and gathering data.

“Everyone’s finally here... Finally.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Surprisingly, it was Laura drawing Chifuyu’s ire. It seems like she’d overslept for once, and arrived five minutes late.

“Why don’t you give us an explanation of the IS core network?”

“Yes, ma’am. IS cores are equipped with mesh networking facilities to share information. These were developed for communication across long distances in outer space, but are now used as the open and private channels over which pilots can converse. Recent research has also isolated automatic ‘sharing’ between the cores, used to further evolve their capabilities. The developer, Professor Shinonono, viewed this as part of their natural evolution and allowed it to proceed unchecked, a process which is still incomplete and thus poorly understood.”

“You earn your marks, I see. I’ll forgive you for being late this time.”

Laura sighed in relief, and it looked like she was patting her own chest. I couldn’t blame her. I was sure she learned exactly what it meant to be on Chifuyu’s bad side in Germany.

“Anyway, let’s split into groups and begin equipment testing. If you have your own IS, focus on its custom parts. Hop to it.”

The class echoed with a single ‘yes, ma’am.’ Seeing every first year student lined up really drove home how many of us there were. Oh, by the way, the beach we were using was enclosed on all four sides by cliffs. It was like a secret beach—like a dome, or like the school arenas. To get out to the open ocean, we’d have to dip down into an underwater tunnel. It was the kind of place you’d shoot a movie. But the IS here, and their equipment, were what we’d come here to test. Of course, since we’d be piloting, everyone was in their IS suit. Being at the sea just made them seem even more like swimsuits.

“Shinonono. If you could come over here for a moment.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Houki, carrying gear for the Uchigane, walked over toward Chifuyu.

“Starting today, you’ve got your own pers—”

“Chiiiiichaaaaan!”

As an engine roared, a human form swooped close through clouds of sand. *Wow, she's fast.* It seemed like she was piloting an IS, but the real problem was who she was.

"Tabane..."

And so it was. Shinonono Tabane, the genius, had chosen to barge in uninvited on our class trip.

"Hey there! Long time no see, Chichan! Gimme a hug, Show me that you love me— WAH!"

Tabane's leap was stopped with a single open palm directly across her face. Chifuyu dug her fingers in, too. She really was merciless.

"Quiet down, Tabane."

"Mmph... Your iron claw is as sharp as ever."

Tabane was no slouch either, given that she was able to slip out of it. Alighting on the ground, she turned toward Houki.

"Heyo!"

"Hello..."

"It's been so long, hasn't it? How many years? You've gotten so big, Houki! Especially your breasts!"

**Bam!**

"I'll hit you."

"You're supposed to say that before you hit someone... Especially if you're going to hit them with a sheath! Meanie! Houki, you're a meanie!" Tabane rubbed her head as tears streamed down her cheeks. Everyone else, meanwhile, watched, astounded.

"Excuse me, but only IS-related personnel are allowed—" Ms. Yamada chimed in.

"Hm? That's a strange thing to bring up. There aren't many people more IS-related than I am."

"Well, er, ah. I suppose that's true." Ms. Yamada was shot down with a single burst. There was no point talking to Tabane once she got rolling. You just had to let her finish.

"C'mon, Tabane. Introduce yourself. You're making things awkward for my students," said Chifuyu.

"Aww, do I have to? I'm Tabane the genius! Hi, hi! That's all."

Having said that, she spun around. The class' jaws dropped even lower as they realized the person in front of them was Shinonono Tabane, genius inventor of the IS. The girls quickly began to chatter among themselves.

"Good grief. Can't you even introduce yourself properly? Class, no slacking off! Ignore this person and get back to testing."

"It's mean to just call me 'this person.' Can't you call me Lovely Tabane?"

"Just shut up already."

Ms. Yamada nervously watched the banter between the two old

acquaintances. “Er, ah, what should I do about this?”

“I told you. Just ignore this person. Focus on making sure each group is keeping up.”

“Understood.”

“You’re so kind to her... I’m jealous! You must have been bewitched by this huge-breasted devil!” Tabane flew off toward Ms. Yamada as she spoke. Her hands dug eagerly into her voluptuous breasts.

“Eek! Wh-What are you doing!”

“This is gonna be fun!”

It didn’t take Tabane long to change what she was after, did it? What happened to her jealousy? Really, though, Tabane’s own breasts were bigger than Chifuyu’s, and about even with Ms. Yamada’s. It was quite the sight to watch them go at it.

“Knock it off! Your breasts are plenty big enough, too.”

“You’ve got such a dirty mind, Chichan.”

“Go die in a fire.”

Chifuyu gave Tabane a full-force kick which sent her sprawling in the sand. I suppose it should be said again that this was the genius who’d developed both the theoretical underpinnings of IS, and the actual implementation.

“So, about the thing I asked you for...” Houki hesitantly asked.

When she heard this, Tabane’s eyes lit up, and she chuckled, “It’s all ready to go. Look up at the sky!”

Tabane pointed straight upward with a flourish. Following her finger, Houki, as well as everyone else, turned their eyes heavenward.

**Whoosh!**

“Wha—”

Suddenly, in the blink of an eye and the crash of a heavy impact, a block of metal plunged into the sand. In the next moment, its glimmering silver walls parted, revealing to us its contents. Inside was

---

“Ta-dah! This is Houki’s personal IS—Akatsubaki! Handmade by yours truly, with every spec a cut above the state of the art!”

—A form clad in crimson armor pulled itself from the container, as if answering Tabane’s call. It glimmered in the sunlight, as if to emphasize its newness. *Did Tabane just blurt out something really impressive? If it’s a cut above state of the art in every way... It must be one of the very newest and most powerful IS.*

“All right! Time to get you set up and customized, Houki! I’ll help you out, so it should be over in a jiffy~♪”

“If you don’t mind...”

“Why so formal? We’re sisters, we should have nicknames for—”

“Just hurry it up.”

Houki was practically defining ‘standoffish,’ doing the bare minimum to follow along with Tabane without making conversation.

“Mmm. Good idea. Let’s get started.”

With a beep, Tabane pressed a button on a remote controller. In an instant, Akatsubaki’s armor folded back, and it was ready to accept a pilot. It even kneeled automatically for ease of mounting. *That’s actually kind of awesome.*

“I’ve already started to set it up with your data, so it should be just a quick update. Here we go! Beep, boop!” Tabane slid her fingers over the console. Six holographic displays opened in midair, displaying a tremendous amount of data. At the same time, six holographic keyboards appeared in midair under them. “It’s set up to be an all-purpose IS focusing on close combat, so you should find it easy to get used to. Your big sister also set up plenty of automatic help for you.”

“Thanks, I guess.” Houki still seemed rather cold. Honestly, they were sisters, so I wished they’d get along better. I didn’t know all the details, but it seemed that Houki still held a grudge from being forced to transfer schools when Tabane wouldn’t give up her research. That was years ago, though. Shouldn’t it be water under the bridge by now?

“Hmm-hmm-hmm~ Houki, you’ve gotten even better with a sword. I can tell it just by looking at your muscles. I want you to know I’m proud of you.”

“.....”

“Tee-hee, you’re ignoring me again. M’kay, setup’s complete. That was fast! Sometimes I amaze myself.”

While they made idle chatter, Tabane’s fingers never stopped flying over the keys. She moved as quickly, as fluidly, as a concert pianist, constantly scanning over each display every few seconds. No matter how much she played the fool, she was obviously something beyond even the average genius during moments like these. Oh, and as for Akatsubaki itself, maybe it was because she’d already entered some data, but it didn’t transform as drastically as Byakushiki. Mostly, it just seemed to adjust itself to Houki’s body.

Still, it definitely looked like it was set up for close combat. The only weaponry I could see was a katana-style blade on each hip. In a way, it reminded me of Byakushiki. On the other hand, Tabane had just said it had ‘automatic help’ and it was ‘an all-purpose IS specializing in close combat,’ so maybe it had something like Blue Tears.

“Shinonono’s getting something like that? Just because they’re sisters?”

“Seems like it. It doesn’t seem fair.”

Whispers arose from the crowd. The first person to respond, surprisingly, was Tabane herself.

“Haven’t you been paying attention in history class? The world has never, ever, ever been fair.”

Picked out from the crowd, the complainer grimaced and went back to work. Brushing her off, Tabane continued working. Even as she spoke, her fingers hadn’t stopped. She really was a genius. Soon she finished and started to close the displays.

“The rest of the personalization should be automatic. Oh, Icky, can you show me Byakushiki? I’ve been dying to see it again.”

“Uh... Okay.”

With her displays tidied up, Tabane turned to me. Her skirt, fluttering in the breeze, gave a ladylike impression that was the opposite of her girlish personality. Anyway, I brought my left hand over the gauntlet on my right and focused for a moment.

*Come forth, Byakushiki!*

As if responding to my will, it brought forth a burst of light. Glowing particles gathered in the air, forming into a ring. As the halo wrapped around me, it took form. The form of my personal IS, Byakushiki. Specialized for melee combat, it was armed solely with the blade Yukihira Nigata. Its beautiful curves had no need for any bolt-ons. *Okay, maybe not quite those implications.*

“C’mon, show me that data!” With a thunk, Tabane clamped a cable onto Byakushiki’s armor. As soon as she did, her displays reopened in midair. “Wow, this is an interesting fragment map. I wonder how it ended up like that? I don’t think I’ve ever seen this happen before. I wonder if it’s because you’re a boy?”

As far as I knew, a ‘fragment map’ was a record of the IS’ development based on personalization, about equivalent to a person’s DNA.

“By the way, Tabane. About that. I’m a guy, so why can I pilot an IS?”

“Mm? Hmm. I wonder. I’m not really sure, either. If I break the whole thing down into nano-particles I could probably find out. Are you up for it?”

As an aside, I was pretty sure when she said ‘the whole thing’ she meant with me still inside.

“I’ll pass.”

“Mwahaha, I thought you’d say so. Anyway, I don’t know, so I don’t know what else to tell you besides ‘I don’t know.’ I built the IS to evolve on their own, so I guess it doesn’t surprise me.” She giggled again. *Well, I should’ve expected as much.*

“Oh, any reason why can’t I add any other equipment?”

“Because I set it up not to accept any.”

“Wait, what, you built Byakushiki?”

“Well, yeah. Or rather, I poked at a failed experiment until it kinda worked. But anyway, that’s why it can use a one-off ability even in first shift! Isn’t that super-convenient? I think I did a great job. Plus, you know, that’s the kind of IS they are? Japanese ones, that is.”

“You moron! That’s enough classified info out of your mouth!”

**Bam!** A merciless blow smacked into Tabane’s head. It came, of course, from the demon teacher Chifuyu.

“Oww... Chichan, you’ve always been such a physical lover.”

“Why can’t you just shut up?”

As another smack struck Tabane, a girl called out to her, “Pardon me! I’ve heard so, so much about your talents, Professor Shinonono. Is there any chance I could prevail on you to take a look over my IS as well?”

Who was it but Cecilia? Her eyes were glittering. Maybe she was excited to meet someone as famous as Tabane, but...

“Huh? Who the heck are you? I don’t remember knowing any blondes. After years and years, I’m finally reuniting with Houki and with Chichan and with Icky. Think what kind of emotional scene that is. I don’t understand where you get the idea that you can just open your mouth and talk over it. Just who the heck you, anyway?”

Her words were as cold as her tone and her glare.

“Er, ah...”

“Jeez, you’re annoying. Go away or something.”

“Ugh...”

Having been shot down so thoroughly, even Cecilia had no choice but to dejectedly give up. The rejection before she’d even been able to process Tabane’s sudden change in attitude left her with tears in her eyes. But then again, Tabane’s always been like this. She said it herself, “I can’t really tell the difference between people. I can recognize Houki, Chichan, and Icky. And my parents, I guess. Anyone else? I’m not interested enough to care.” And true to her word, Tabane was like that to everyone but us, though she was getting a little bit better. The old her would’ve just straight ignored Cecilia. It seemed like Chifuyu had beaten at least a little sense into her. Or at the very least, enough sense to respond.

“Wow, that blonde girl was a weirdo. I hate how foreigners are so pushy. I’d really rather deal with Japanese people. Japanese people are the best. Not that I care about most of them, either. Just Houki, Chichan, and Icky.”

“What about mom and dad?”

“Mm? Oh, yeah, them too, I guess.”

Hm? That was kind of a funny answer.

“Anyway, whatever. More importantly, Icky, do you want me to

upgrade Byakushiki?"

"Huh? Upgrade? Like, how?"

"Well. How about giving it a makeover to look like a butler? I've always thought you'd look great in a tailcoat. Or a maid's dress, too."

*Gonna pretend I didn't hear that.*

"I think I'm fine."

"You're fine? You're saying you're fine with that? Okay, hold on just a sec!"

"Wh— You know I didn't mean that! No! Nonono! Nothankyou!"

"Hi, Nothankyou! I'm Northernlights!"

Wait, uhh. That didn't even have any relevance except the first syllable.

"Really, Icky, what about a girl's outfit?"

"What gave you that idea?!"

"Hm? I've been reading a manga about that kind of thing."

"Can you not try out random things from manga on me?"

"Aww. You're not fun at all."

"Er... Ahem." Houki cleared her throat to interject. "Aren't you still working on mine?"

"Yeah, just finishing up. Hmm, three minutes. What a waste, I could've made a cup of ramen with that kind of time."

*I don't think it's that big of a waste... Plus, a lot of ramen these days doesn't even take that long.*

"All right, now give it a shot. It should mirror your thoughts exactly."

"Very well. I'll try it out now." The cables attached to Akatsubaki disconnected with an audible pop. Houki closed her eyes, focused for a moment, and it immediately leapt into the sky. "Wha—"

The shockwave from its acceleration was enough to stir up whirls of sand. Looking around for Houki, I finally picked her up on the Byakushiki's hypersensor—gliding 200 meters above.

"So, whaddaya think? Even better than you expected, right?"

"I suppose."

Tabane must also have had an IS, as I heard them converse over the open channel.

"Now try out your katanas! The right-hand one is Amazuki and the left-hand one is Karaware. Here, I'm sending over the data on their capabilities." As Tabane spoke, her fingers danced in the air. Houki, receiving the data, drew both katanas at once. Her stance was immediately recognizable. "Let your dear old sister Tabane give you the rundown! Amazuki—Moonlit Rain—is built for one-on-one fights. At the same time as it makes a precise cut, blades of energy shoot out and turn your enemy into Swiss cheese! It's got about the range of an assault rifle. You'll still have trouble at sniper rifle range, but



Akatsubaki's speed should make up for it."

I didn't know if she was following along with Tabane's explanation or not, but either way, Houki gave an experimental slash. She had been holding it crossed over from her right hand to her left shoulder, the Shinonono two-sword style's 'Shieldblade' stance. It was a cautious posture, adaptable for offense or defense, which aimed to pivot the force of an attack through her shoulders and into a counter. At the same time as her wrists locked, a twisting ball of red laser beams formed from the air around it, then fired off one by one, burning holes in the cloud she faced.

"Next up is Karaware—Skyrender. This one's better against groups. Just take a big slash, and it sends a wave of energy flying in its path. It'll automatically expand, you don't even have to think any more about it. See if you can cut these down!" Even as she spoke, Tabane was calling forth a 16-missile pod. No sooner did the particles of light coalesce than it let off every shot in one barrage.

"Houki!"

"I can do this— Now that I have Akatsubaki!" Houki drew forth Karaware from below her right arm in a spinning slash. Behind it trailed another red laser beam, which spread just as Tabane said it would and took down all 16 missiles.

"Holy crap..."

Houki and her crimson IS imposingly loomed forth from the smoke and flames. The crowd of students was at a loss for words—in amazement, and in envy—at its performance. Tabane watched the whole thing with a self-satisfied grin on her face.

"....."

There was one person, however, whose eyes were burning a hole in Tabane. It was... *Chifuyu? Why do you have that look on your face? You look like you want to kill her...*

"Ms. Orimura! Big trouble!" Hearing Ms. Yamada suddenly speak up, Chifuyu's expression cleared, and she turned to her. Ms. Yamada was always flustered about something, but this time was obviously different.

"Is something wrong?"

"Look at this!"

As she glanced over the mini-terminal Ms. Yamada handed her, Chifuyu's expression clouded again.

"Emergency Condition A? Countermeasures initiated..."

"The, uh, the unit being tested over Hawaii—"

"Shh! That's top secret! The students can hear you."

"Sorry, ma'am..."

"Where are the ones with personal IS?"

"One's missing, but the rest are here."

Chifuyu and Ms. Yamada were discussing something in a hushed voice. Noticing that they'd drawn the attention of the class, they switched over to hand signals. *Huh? Those aren't normal hand signals... Is that some kind of military code language?* I felt like I'd seen something like it a few times before, back when Chifuyu was a Japanese National Cadet.

"Anyway, I'll contact the other teachers."

"Understood— Attention, everyone!" As Ms. Yamada ran off, Chifuyu clapped her hands to focus the class. "All IS Academy instructors have received emergency orders. Today's testing is canceled. All groups, return your IS to storage and return to the resort. Stay in your rooms until contacted. Dismissed!"

"Eh...?"

"Cancelled? But why? What do you mean, emergency orders?"

"I don't get what's going on..."

Confusion spread through the girls assembled on the beach. Through it, though, Chifuyu's steely voice sounded, "Get to it! Anyone caught outside their room will be carried back by force! Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

The girls quickly got to work, dismissing their test equipment and loading their IS back onto the carts. I'd never seen them quite this afraid before.

"If you have your own IS, come to me! Orimura, Alcott, Dunois, Bodewig, Huang! Shinonono, you too!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Houki landed next to me, with a strange urgency in her voice. I had nearly forgotten that Houki had her own IS now, too. *There's something not right about all this...* The unease sent my heart pounding.



"Let me explain the situation."

At the very back of the resort, in the Windswept Flower Hall, we gathered with the teachers. The lights were dimmed, drawing attention to a large holographic display.

"Two hours ago, the third-generation IS Silverio Gospel, a joint development between the US and Israel, lost control during testing over Hawaii. We've received word that it's now left its test airspace."

I followed the explanation with a blank look on my face. The... what? Huh? A military IS? Losing control? What did that have to do with us? As I puzzled over this, I looked around at the others' reactions.

"....."

Each carried a guarded expression. They were proper national cadets, unlike Houki and I. Maybe they'd had training in what to do in

situations like these. Laura's expression, especially, was stone cold.

"Satellite tracking indicates that Silverio Gospel's path will pass through local airspace at a point two kilometers from here in approximately fifty minutes. The Academy command has ordered us to respond." Chifuyu continued matter-of-factly. The next words out of her mouth, though, were unimaginable. "Academy personnel will use the training IS to seal off both air and sea routes. Responsibility for the primary objective will be left to those with personal IS."

Really? They wanted us to stop an out-of-control military IS?

"We'll now take any questions about the mission. Raise your hand if you wish to speak."

"Yes." The first to raise her hand was Cecilia. "Requesting technical data on the target IS."

"Approved. But remember, this is top secret material for both nations. None of it leaves this room. Any leaks and you'll all be subject to an inquiry and at least two years of observation."

"Understood."

While I was still trying to get a grip on the situation, Cecilia and the other national cadets were already discussing the data.

"A nonconventional strategic bombardment IS... It must be equipped with all-range weaponry like my IS."

"Powerful, and agile, too. That's going to be hard to deal with. Its specs beat out my Shenlong as well, so it'll have the advantage..."

"Its loadout seems like it'll be trouble. I've just received a defensive loadout for my Revive, but I'm not sure about taking repeated hits."

"The data has nothing on its melee capabilities, though. Its skills are a mystery. Can't we conduct further reconnaissance?"

Cecilia, Rin, Charl, and Laura were all business as they discussed the operation. Meanwhile, I sank further into confusion. Honestly, I was pretty disgusted with myself.



“No. It’s already moving at supersonic speed. We’ve only got one shot at this.”

“Only one shot... Meaning... something that can take it down with one shot.” Hearing Ms. Yamada, the others turned to look at me.

“Eh...?”

“Ichika, you need to take it down with Reiraku Byakuya.”

“We have no other choice. The problem is, though...”

“How to get Ichika to it. He’ll need all his energy for the attack. How does he get close with it?”

“And it needs to be an IS that can match its speed. Likely one with a high-performance hypersensor, too.”

“Hold it! You expect me to go up there?!”

“**Of course we do!**” Their voices echoed as one.

“Orimura, this is not a drill. It’s real combat. If you’re not ready, don’t force yourself.”

“Right...” Hearing Chifuyu’s words, I kicked myself into action. “I’ll do it. At least, I’ll try my best.”

“All right. Then, let’s form a battle plan. Which of your IS is currently capable of reaching the highest speed?”

“That would be my Blue Tears. The high-mobility assault package ‘Strike Gunner’ has just arrived from England, and it also includes an ultra-high-performance hypersensor.”

All IS have these equipment sets referred to as ‘packages.’ They took many forms, often including not only weaponry, but also things like enhanced armor or additional thrusters. It also seemed that personal IS had specialized, unique packages called ‘Haute Couture,’ though I’d never seen one of those. Equipping a package could dramatically alter an IS’ capabilities and qualities, adapting it for an alternate tactical role. Oh, and me and the other first years with personal IS had a semi-customized default package. Well, except for Charl, who had a fully customized one. That was a little confusing.

“Alcott. How many supersonic flight hours do you have?”

“Twenty hours.”

“Hmm... This should work, th—”

Just as Chifuyu was about to finish, an impossibly-enthusiastic voice filled the room.

“Hold it, hold it! Put that idea on hold!” The voice was coming from the ceiling, of all places. As we all looked up, Tabane’s head popped out of the woodwork.

“Ms. Yamada... Remove her.”

“Huh? Ah, yes, ma’am! Professor Shinonono, if you could come down from there...”

“Geronimo!”

Tabane made a somersault before touching down. Her agility would be the envy of any circus clown. Just how many dumb tricks did she have up her sleeve?

“Chichan! Chichan! I’ve got an idea that’s so much better loading into my brain right now!”

“Get out of here... Now.”

Chifuyu held a palm to her forehead. Ms. Yamada stepped forward to forcibly drag Tabane out of the room, but Tabane managed to slip out of her grasp.

“Listen, listen! This is the moment for Akatsubaki to make its debut!”

“What?”

“Look at its specs! Even without a special package, it’s capable of supersonic speeds!” Tabane had opened up a wall of displays around Chifuyu, as if to trap her, before she even finished talking. “Just sweep a few armor panels, here and here and here and here. And, tada! It’s more than fast enough!”

Sweeping armor? I’d never heard of something like that before, so I swung my head to look at the screens around Chifuyu. She’d even taken over the main display which had been showing Silverio Gospel’s specs and changed it over to Akatsubaki.

“Just let me explain! Variable-sweep armor is a special feature of the fourth-generation IS I’ve created!”

*Fourth?!*

“I’m such a nice person that I’ll even give you a simple, easy-to-follow explanation! Icky, you look like you need it. I bet you’re so grateful right now. The first generation of IS were focused entirely on developing the core unit. Next were attempts to fit various extended weaponry—this was the second generation. And the third generation implemented strategic weaponry, controlled by the pilot’s thoughts, through the ‘image interface.’ Things like area denial weapons, BT weapons, and the AIC. And lately, I’ve been keeping myself amused by thinking of a fourth generation that can be fully versatile without alternate packages. Do you understand now, Icky? I hope you do, I love quick learners!”

“Uhh... Well, uh, kinda?”

*Give me a moment to process, here...* The entire developed world was just starting to roll out their first third-generation prototypes. How’d we skip ahead an entire generation?

“Tch-tch! I’m not your run-of-the-mill genius! This is the kind of thing I can have done before afternoon tea!”

Calling it finished and going for snacks, uhh, really didn’t make it seem like she thought it through that well...

“Oh, and it’s in use on Byakushiki’s Yukihiro Nigata, too. I snuck it

in to see if it'd even work."

"EHHH?" Even the others were astounded.

*So that's what happens when Reiraku Byakuya is activated?* Then that made Byakushiki itself a fourth-generation IS.

"It worked pretty well, so I built the variable-sweep feature into Akatsubaki's armor plating. Use it when you're already operating at the limits, and you can basically double up!"

"Hey, uh, wait a minute. The whole thing? The whole thing works like Yukihiro Nigata? That's..."

"Yep. Absurdly powerful. The strongest, really."

Everyone, myself included, just sat there with blank stares. Chifuyu was the only one who wasn't left completely speechless by Shinonono Tabane being herself.

"Oh, and Akatsubaki's swept armor is an advanced type including separate profiles for attack, defense, and general mobility. It completely fulfills the design goals of what I like to call a 'Realtime Multirole Actress.' And I did it first. Yay me!"

Silence followed. Absolute, wordless, silence.

"*Huuuuuh?* Why's everyone sitting around like they're at a funeral? Did someone die? It's weird."

There was absolutely nothing weird about it. Vast sums from national treasuries. Years of painstaking research by the brightest minds, just to be the first to field a third-generation IS. And all of it was completely worthless. This... This was just absurd.

"I told you, Tabane. You go too far."

"Really? But I'm only just warming up!"

It was only after Chifuyu scolded her that Tabane understood why we were so quiet.

"Oh, but don't make that face, Icky! Akatsubaki isn't finished yet. You just seemed so gloomy that I wanted to play a trick on you."

As if her little wink there would excuse this...

"Anyway, though. If Akatsubaki works as planned... Well, you'll be home in time for dinner!"

In time for dinner... Ugh, enough about that already.

"Now that I think of it, though. Something getting loose over the sea reminds me of the White Knight Incident a decade ago."

Tabane grinned. Beside her, Chifuyu gave the look of someone who knew things were about to go off the rails.

The White Knight Incident... I think everyone in the world probably knew about it at this point. Ten years ago, Tabane revealed the IS, but at first no one respected her accomplishment. Even as she insisted they'd make all existing weapons obsolete, no one believed her. No one had any reason to believe her.

“I never expected the whole world would think I was a fool. They could find it in themselves to believe in gods, but not in my talent that was right there in front of them? That’s just idolatry.”

A month after IS were announced, the incident occurred. Well, ‘incident’ was a strange term for something as serious as that. 2,341 missiles, from every country within range of Japan, were all hacked in one fell swoop—and fired uncontrollably. In the midst of the chaos and despair, a single woman wrapped in a platinum-white IS appeared. Her face was covered by an early visor-type hypersensor. Still, it was like something out of a superhero comic. Everyone who saw her stared up at the sky in awe. That hero, looking for all the world like a knight of yore.

“Cut them down. Half of the missiles, one thousand twenty-two of them, in a single slash. It was incredible.”

In her hand was something which could only be called a sword. Someone unmistakably human, darting and weaving at supersonic speed, cutting down modern weaponry like missiles... It was unbelievable. And then, to shoot down those outside of her reach, she summoned a gigantic particle cannon—the sort of thing that was still in the labs at that point—as if by magic.

Melee combat at supersonic speeds, the ability to materialize large objects from particles, and practical beam weaponry. No modern weapons system could have stood up to any one of those capabilities, never mind all three. But while the world was stunned, it wasn’t silenced. The countries bordering Japan immediately scrambled reconnaissance sorties, in violation of international law. Their orders: “Analyze the target. If possible, capture it. If not—then destroy it.” Dozens of what were, at the time, the latest generation of aircraft were thrown at her. But they didn’t stand a chance.

“You’re not even scratching an IS with a Vulcan cannon or missiles. Not with its energy shield.”

Even more importantly, fighter jets couldn’t make fast enough turns because their pilots couldn’t handle the G-forces involved, but IS were different. Their life-support systems kept the pilot from blacking out or having trouble breathing, no matter what maneuvers they made. And the data supplied by the hypersensor could be analyzed and acted upon faster than any computer system.

The white knight shot down the entire air armada without taking a single life. That, more than anything, drove home the true hopelessness of their situation. Not only that she could outfight them, but outclassed them enough to avoid even drawing blood... Incensed, they scrambled another wave of fighters, but it was too late. The white knight had disappeared, along with the setting sun. Completely vanished, as if a recording of her sudden arrival had simply played



backwards. The white knight was gone as if she were never there.

She didn't show up on radar. She couldn't even be seen. It was absolutely perfect cloaking. The entire world tried their hardest to find her—and they failed. That one IS destroyed or disabled 2,341 missiles, 207 fighter aircraft, 7 cruisers, 5 aircraft carriers, and 8 spy satellites. It was truly the ultimate weapon, and everyone in the world knew about it by the next morning.

With that, it was proven that a single IS could stand up to an entire army, and the world quickly drafted treaties restricting their use while kicking development into high gear. The great powers had engaged in a battle of wits with Shinonono Tabane, and having lost, they accepted her standpoint that only an IS could defeat another IS. They had no choice but to accept it.

“And that's how my lovely IS caught on so quickly! As for putting women on top, meh, I don't really care. But the constant kidnapping and assassination attempts were certainly entertaining!” Tabane giggled. She seemed so enthusiastic, like a mother talking about her child's big moment in the spotlight. “And, you know what? Guess who that white knight was? Who can tell me? I bet you can, Chichan!”

“No clue.”

“Well. Judging from her bust size of 88 centimeters—”

**Bam!** Chifuyu's clipboard attack—well, screen attack. Jeez, those had metal edges.

“You're so mean, Chichan! That split my brain in half!”

“That's good. You can take turns thinking with your left brain and your right brain.”

“Ooh! That makes sense! You're so smart, Chichan!”

I should point out once again that the person playfully needling Chifuyu was none other than Shinonono Tabane, genius among geniuses and the inventor of the IS. Though the validity of that statement has become iffier and iffier with each passing moment. Wait a sec. Shouldn't Tabane know exactly who the mysterious white knight was? After all, she gave Houki her IS...

“That was incredible, Chichan!”

“I suppose. The white knight was definitely incredible.”

She definitely made it seem like it was Chifuyu, I think. But the IS Chifuyu used now was completely different from the white knight's. I wonder where that IS went, anyway? It was the first IS to ever see combat, so surely it was in a lab somewhere still being mined for data day and night. After all, after the last of the 467 IS currently in existence were completed, not a single new one has appeared. To be precise, IS required a core, of which only 467 were made. In other words, no one would let a core just fall through the cracks.

Now that I thought about it, when Tabane disappeared three years ago, she left behind a letter reading ‘This is the final core. It’s not a bun. Don’t eat it. Lucky you! Free IS!’ How did I know? It was broadcast worldwide. She set up a TV special, ‘Shinonono Tabane’s Worldwide Live Interview.’ But when the media descended on her lab at the appointed time, it was completely empty. That didn’t stop them from broadcasting footage of the core and the letter, though.

Really, though... The older people around me, Chifuyu and Tabane both, had a habit of disappearing. It was honestly pretty annoying.

Anyway, that wasn’t important right now. By the way, of the 467 IS in the world, 322 were deployed for military purposes. The remaining 145 were reserved for various development labs around the world, with a number of testbeds for use at IS Academy drawn from that pool.

Between teachers’ IS, trainer IS, and personal IS, there were a total of 30 at the Academy. Which made having more than five just among the first years extremely unusual, apparently. It seemed that, normally, there were at most three per year. The reason for so many personal IS this year was probably... me. I was pretty sure there were already a few planned for testing third-generation IS, so when the world’s only male IS pilot appeared and countries reacted to that as well... Well, yeah. Anyway, that was all a bit over my head.

“Back to the point. Tabane, how long will it take to get Akatsubaki ready?”

“Ms. Orimura?!” The cry of shock came from Cecilia. She must have been sure that she’d be selected to participate, as the one of us with a high-mobility package. “I’m certain that my Blue Tears can pull it off!”

“Is that package already installed?”

“Well... Not quite yet...”

That must have been a sore point for her, as her confidence quickly turned into a low murmur. As a contrast, Tabane broke out into a broad smile as she spoke up, “Give me seven minutes, and I’ll have Akatsubaki ready to go.”

“Very well. Orimura and Shinonono will intercept and shoot down the target. The operation begins in T-minus thirty minutes. All personnel, begin preparation immediately.” Chifuyu clapped her hands. The teachers immediately began to prepare the ‘materiel’ needed to provide support. “If you’ve got nothing to do, help them move equipment. Orimura, Shinonono, prepare your IS. Get to it!”

Ugh, she got real serious real fast. As I looked around, I noticed that everyone else had already found something to do.

“Er, what should I...”

“Get Byakushiki set up and ready to go. Oh, and make sure it has full energy.”

“Understood.”

As soon as I answered her, I opened up Byakushiki’s console. Energy level... Check. Everything was working as designed. I was good to go anytime. *Ah, but what about Houki?*

“All right, let’s kick the tires on Akatsubaki!” Tabane cheered.

“.....”

“C’mon. Smile more. You got picked for first string! Isn’t that great?”

“I was born with this expression.”

“I guess. It was cuter when you were a baby, though. You cried sometimes, too.”

“D-Didn’t everyone when they were a baby?!”

Tabane threw out a “Maybe, I guess” as she ran her fingers over Akatsubaki, which Houki had materialized.

“Hm, hmm. Set the back, leg, and arm variable-sweep armor for maximum thrust. Otherwise, leave it in support fire mode. There you go. All right, time to get started.”

As Tabane spoke, she was enveloped in a haze of glowing particles. Two parts formed around each of her forearms, for a total of four. They were around the size of IS armor, and had its general appearance, as well.

“Is this your IS, Tabane?”

“Huh? Nah, Icky. This is my mobile lab. I am a cat. As yet I have no name,” she intoned.

She waved her index finger in the air, and the two handlike parts on her right arm mimicked the motion. *What the heck is this?*

“Okay, here goes!”

Tabane picked up, between her fingers, dozens of screwdrivers and drills and knives and things I couldn’t even recognize.

“Mm-hm. If it starts to hurt, raise your right hand.”

It was the perfect phrase for what I was watching take place. She slid something which looked like a scalpel underneath an invisible panel and flipped it open, then quickly clamped it to hold it. From inside, she pulled a mechanism and began tweaking. The crazy part was that she was doing it in four other places at the same time. It seemed like she was working on the toughest part herself, while letting those floating arms handle the rest. Each finger of the arms seemed to have a range of tools built in, as they’d already begun cutting and welding with lasers while maxing adjustments with precise manipulators.

The most amazing part, though, was that Tabane herself wasn’t using any outside assistance—not hypersensor, no AR goggles,

nothing. How could she handle dealing with that kind of intricate machinery?! Tabane was happily humming, seemingly without a care in the world. But she was working incredibly fast.

“And along came the jaw!”

A jaw? From where? I never could understand what Tabane was thinking. As I pondered that, I made eye contact with Houki. She seemed really nervous.

“W-What? What is it?”

“Hm? Oh, nothing.”

“Oh, good.”

“.....”

“.....”

I just continued looking at her.

“No, really, what do you want?”

Crap, looks like I made her mad.

“No, really, it’s nothi— Oww!”

As I aimlessly chatted with Houki, a fist caught me from behind. With as much force behind it as it had, it must have been Chifuyu.

“If you don’t have anything to do, Alcott can fill you in on high-speed combat.”

“Understood.”

***Clang, clank. Grind, whiiirrrr.*** As the sounds of hard work settled into a sort of background music, I tried to get Cecilia’s attention. Somehow, it was really calming.

“Sigh... First I angered Professor Shinonono, then I was removed from the mission team... It’s simply too much...”

“Hey, Cecilia. Hey. Heeeeeey.”

“Yes— Eek!” Cecilia, suddenly noticing that I was staring at her, jumped in shock. At the same time, the small-ish monitor she was carrying slipped from her grasp, but I smoothly caught it.

“Whoa. This may be small, but it’s pretty heavy.”

“W-W-What is it? Did you need me for something?”

“Oh, uh, Chifu—er, Ms. Orimura told me to ask you for a rundown of high-speed combat.”

“R-Really?!”

Her smile suddenly beamed. That was nice to see. I’d been a bit worried about how dejected she was. It was way better to be a sunny person than a gloomy person.

“A-Ahem. I’ll be giving you some pointers on high-speed combat. First, Ichika, do you have an ultra-high-performance hypersensor?”

“Nope.”

“I see. Then, let me warn you. When using an ultra-high-performance hypersensor adapted for high-speed combat—”

Cecilia put a hand on her hip, struck a pose, and began to explain,

but was interrupted by a second voice, "It's like the world is moving in slow-motion. At least for your first time."

"Ling?! I was already in the process explaining to him. How many hours of high-speed combat have you even logged?"

"Twelve. Not quite as many as you, but still."

Cecilia shrunk back at the unexpected response. Clearing her throat to regain control, she resumed her lecture, "And the reason that this slow-motion effect occurs is that—"

"The hypersensor sharpens the senses of the pilot in order to transfer more detailed data. So it ends up seeming like the world is moving slower. But that's just the first time. You get used to it pretty quick."

"Charlotte?! I was already explaining—"

"The important thing to focus on is your boost gauge. Ichika, you have a habit of relying on Ignition Boost. At high speeds, your boost gauge will drop nearly twice as fast."

"L-Laura?! I—"

"Oh, and because your relative velocity is so much higher, you'll take significantly more damage from ranged weapons. If you get hit in the wrong place, it could pierce your armor in one shot."

"Even Ms. Yamada?! I give up! Why must everyone keep interrupting me?!"

Cecilia was pretty mad. It seems like the interruptions had finally made her boil over.

"Er, Cecilia?"

"What is it?!"

"Thanks for teaching me so much. Is there anything else I should keep in mind?"

She was already so angry that she was nearly about to bite my head off, but as she heard what I was saying she gave me a blank look. Two blinks later, the anger faded from her face.

"Oh, why, it was nothing! A British National Cadet is always glad to answer questions!" Her smug grin returned as her hand moved back to her hip. Yep, she was definitely herself again.

"Well, there's one thing. Your Reiraku Byakuya is the key to this mission, so you should avoid using Ignition Boost at all. It burns too much energy." Rin, having finished moving her equipment, spoke up.

"Oh, and you should think about how to defend yourself. Normally, you'd want a riot shield for these tactics, but your weapon's a two-hander." Charl was also done moving, and wandered over to rejoin the conversation. After that, even Laura and Ms. Yamada joined in the planning, as well. Even though it was planning for the upcoming mission, it still felt good to have people gather around me.

*No matter what, I must succeed.* Inside my heart, I renewed my

determination.



The time was 11:30. The July skies were clear and blue, as if nothing were out of the ordinary today, and the sun beat down relentlessly. Houki and I stood a short distance apart on the sand. Our gazes met, and we each gave a quick nod.

“Come forth, Byakushiki.”

“Let’s go, Akatsubaki!”

We were enveloped in light, and IS armor began to form around us. At the same time, I felt the lightness brought by the PIC and effortless motion from the power assist.

“All right, Houki. I’m counting on you.”

“My pride would normally never accept a man riding on top of me, but just this once, I’ll make an exception.”

The mission plan called for Houki to handle all the maneuvering, meaning I’d have to ride on her back. When it was first brought up, she was extremely displeased about it, but it almost seemed like she was warming up to the idea now. *I hope this works out...* Houki has had her personal IS for less than a day. Even with Tabane’s help customizing it and setting it up, Houki herself would be the weak link. *If anything goes wrong, I’m gonna have to cover for her.* The realization focused my mind.

“Still, I’m glad it’s the two of us sometimes. When you and I work together, there’s nothing we can’t overcome. Right?”

“Yeah. But remember what the teachers said, Houki. This isn’t a drill. You never know what’s going to happen in combat. Always be prepared—”

“I know already. Why, are you scared?”

“No way. But seriously, Houki—”

“Hahaha, don’t worry. I’ll get you up there. Just leave it to me.”

“.....”

She’d been like this for a while now. I knew she must have been excited to finally have her own IS, but this was taking it a bit too far. The anxiety refused to leave me as I climbed onto the back of Houki’s Akatsubaki.

“Orimura, Shinonono, radio check.” Chifuyu’s voice came over the IS open channel. Houki and I both nodded in response. “The mission plan calls for a shoot down on a single approach. Be ready for a quick fight.”

“Roger.”

“I should provide support for Orimura, correct?”

“Yeah. But don’t push yourself too hard. You just got that IS, and you’ve got no combat experience with it. There’s no guarantee

problems won't pop up."

"Understood. I'll do what I can."

Houki may have seemed calm and composed, but her tone of voice seemed positively overjoyed. Hopefully, all my worries were merely superficial.

"Orimura—"

"Yes?"

This time, Chifuyu spoke not over the open channel, but over a private channel. Shocked, I switched over to reply.

"Shinonono seems a bit too fired up. She might push herself too far. If she does, I want you to support her."

"Got it. I'll keep that in mind."

"I leave it to you."

With that, Chifuyu switched back to the open channel, and gave the order.

**"COMMENCE MISSION!"**

And so the operation began. As I clung to Houki's back, we quickly rose to 300 meters. How was she this fast?! It was as quick as my Ignition Boost, no, even faster! Akatsubaki continued its rapid ascent to the planned altitude of 500 meters, unhindered by me on its back.

"Temporary satellite link established. Synchronization complete. Target position confirmed— Let's do this, Ichika!"

"Yeah!"

As Houki shouted, she accelerated Akatsubaki. The variable-sweep armor on its legs and back, true to its name, opened, and a powerful energy streamed forth from within. This was like the variable-sweep armor of the Yukihiro Nigata... No, like an improvement on it. According to Tabane, Akatsubaki could adapt itself for offense, defense, or mobility at a moment's notice. But was all its armor variable-sweep? Just what would happen at full output? Where was it getting all the energy for this, anyway?

"I've spotted her, Ichika!"

".....!"

The feed from the hypersensor floated in my vision as if I were seeing it with my own eyes. The enemy IS, worthy of the name Silverio Gospel, gleamed silver from head to toe. But the most notable thing about it was the gigantic cluster of wings which sprouted from its head. While it glittered the same silver as the body, the intelligence we'd seen indicated that it combined a large thruster and a wide-area suppression fire weapons system. *The data said it could fire in multiple directions at once. But what kind of attack?* That didn't matter. I didn't have time to think about it. As we soared in pursuit, I gripped Yukihiro Nigata.

“I’m speeding up! Contact in ten seconds. Focus, Ichika!”

“Got it!”

The thrusters and the swept armor roared even louder. Their awesome speed quickly closed the distance with the IS. Five, six, seven, eight, nine... Ten!

“AAAARGH!”

I activated Reiraku Byakuya. At the same time, I used Ignition Boost to try to close the remaining gap. *I’ve got you!* Then, at the very instant when my blade was about to make contact with Silverio Gospel—

“What?!”

—The IS made a sudden turn and dodged backward, ready for battle. *Another go-around—no, we have to take it down now!* We were already in range. It was too late to back off. We needed to finish it off before a counterattack. But...

*[Target acquired. Initiating intercept mode. Silver Bell activated.]*

“.....?!”

A flat, mechanical voice came over the open channel. Its obvious malevolence startled me. I had a bad feeling about this. And a few seconds later, I was proven right.

With a bang it spun in the air, passing within millimeters of Reiraku Byakuya’s blade. Even for an IS equipped with a passive inertial canceller by default, that was a tricky maneuver.

“Ugh! Is that wing why it can accelerate so fast?”

It had plenty of other high-output multithrusters, as well, but I’d never seen an IS accelerate so precisely. I began to realize just why it was considered ‘top secret.’

“Houki! Cover me!”

“Got it!”

The longer this took, the worse of a position we’d be in. Letting Houki protect my back, I readied another slash at the target.

“Tch! Damn you!”

Again, though, it spun around, evading me by a hair’s breadth. It moved as if dancing, or as if swimming in the sky. It had played me like a fiddle, and panicked at how little time Reiraku Byakuya had left, I took one more wide swing. And now, it seized upon an opening.

“.....!”

The silver wing... the thrusters’ armor folded wide, as if it were the wings of an angel. *Dammit! It’s the gun barrels—* A thicket of gun barrels pointed from within the wings as they wrapped around me. In the next instant, a hail of bullets of light erupted forth.

“Argh!”

The bullets were highly compressed energy in the shape of feathers. I thought they’d pierced my IS armor and carried on, but a



second later, they exploded. Exploding energy bullets, that was Silverio Gospel's primary weapon. Even worse, they fired incredibly fast. Their speed—the rate of fire—was unbelievable. While they weren't very precisely aimed, it didn't matter. They were explosive. Even a glancing blow would set them off.

"Houki! Let's attack from the sides simultaneously! You take the left!"

"Got it!"

Houki and I traced complex paths toward the IS for a coordinated attack, as it continued firing. But our attack didn't even scratch it. It made a quick evasive maneuver while turning to the counterattack. Its wing thruster may have looked unusual, but it certainly was extremely effective.

"Ichika! I'll pin it down!"

"Okay!"

Houki closed in, both katanas drawn, for a series of slashes. Her arm armor opened up and blades of energy automatically extended, slashing at the IS as she attacked. *Akatsubaki's no pushover either!* Using the mobility of Akatsubaki and the attitude control provided by its variable-sweep armor, Houki darted closer and closer. Her fierce assault forced even it to resort to parrying and blocks.

"HAAA!"

*We've got it!* Reinvigorated, I clutched my sword, but at the same moment Silverio Gospel began a wide-angle counterattack.

[*La-la-la...*] Came a high-pitched synthetic voice. At the same moment, all of the gun emplacements on its wing thrusters opened. A total of 36. And each erupted in indiscriminate fire.

"Not bad... But I'll cut you down to size!" Houki weaved through the rain of bullets for a counterattack. She'd found her chance.

"Ngh...!"

But suddenly, I reversed course, and dove down toward the surface of the sea at full speed.

"Ichika?!"

"RAAAARGH!" With Ignition Boost and Reiraku Byakuya at full output, I chased down the last bullet.



“What are you doing?! We finally had an opening!”

“There’s something down there! I thought the teachers were supposed to clear this sector— Dammit, it’s a poacher boat!”

Still, I couldn’t just let them die.

**Fshhrrr.** The light of the Yukihiro Nigata in my hand began to fade, and its armor folded closed. I... was out of energy. I’d wasted our best—our only—chance. I’d blown the mission.

“You idiot! You did that just to save a few criminals?! It doesn’t matter what happens to them!”

“Houki!”

“Wha—”

“Houki... Houki, that’s too harsh. Don’t say things like that. Just because you’re powerful now, you’re forgetting what it’s like to be weak? That’s not like you, Houki. That’s not like you at all.”

“I-...” Houki raised her hands to her face, as if to cover her wavering expression. At the same time, seeing the katana which fell from her hands dissolve into light, my heart sunk in my throat.

*That was limit down... This is bad.* Limit down, meaning, running out of energy. And this wasn’t in an arena at IS Academy. This was actual combat.

“HOUKI!”

I threw down my sword and launched myself toward her, using the last of my energy for an Ignition Boost. *Come on, Byakushiki! Make it in time!* Ahead of me, I could see Silverio Gospel returning to volley-fire mode. This time, its sights were centered on Houki.

IS armor was extremely brittle when starved of energy. Even a fourth-generation IS would probably be the same. A little bit of energy was reserved for emergency defense, but one hit from that curtain of bullets and there wouldn’t even be enough left of her to leave a stain. *Please! Please, Byakushiki! Please!* The world played in slow-motion as I saw the bullets leave their barrels an instant before I slid between the IS and Houki.

“AAAAAGHH!” As I wrapped my arms around her, the explosions rolled across my back like rain. Dozens of shocks, each strong enough that my energy shield couldn’t absorb it, and I heard my bones creak. My muscles cried out in agony, and my skin, the armor torn from it, burned as if on fire. Amidst the pain which seemed to last an eternity, just once, I looked up at Houki’s face.

*She’s safe... That’s good. Haha, she looks like she’s about to cry. That’s not like her. Oh, her ribbon was burnt off... She... looks good... with her hair down...*

“Ichika? Ichika! ICHIKAAAAAAA!”

“I... Ah.....”

The world spun upside down. No, that wasn't right. I was the one who was upside down. Falling down, down toward the sea. I used the last of my strength to wrap my arms around Houki's head to protect her. The shock tore through my body as we landed with a massive splash. Looking up at Silverio Gospel, I passed out.

## Chapter IV: Dressy White

Long before, when Ichika was in second grade, he'd been practicing kendo for a year, originally enrolling alongside Chifuyu, and had developed some level of experience. *Jeez. She's just too tough.* No matter how he tried, he couldn't defeat the dojo master's daughter, a girl his own age.

At practice that morning, a squabble had turned into sparring, and she'd sent him down with a single slash to the side. *Dammit... I never win... I wish I could win for once...* Ichika's disappointment was visible in his sullen expression as he cleaned the classroom. The glare of the afternoon sun filled the room. His other classmates had ditched to go play, but he didn't care. Someone had to clean, and it may as well have been him.

"Hey, tomboy! What happened to your bokken?"

"It's a shinai..."

"Either way, a tomboy like you needs a weapon."

"....."

"You talk funny, too."

The girl didn't answer. Three boys had surrounded one girl and were teasing her. Yet she refused to yield a single step, and glared at them with clear eyes. The girl's name was Houki.

"Look at the tomboy!"

"Knock it off, guys. If you don't have anything to do, either go home or help clean, okay?"

Frustrated by their pointless mocking, Ichika snapped at the boys.

"Oh, you're on her side, Orimura?"

"I bet she's his girlfriend."

The childish teasing had always been harsh, and always would be. Even though they were the same age, Ichika had no time for it.

"Get out of the way, I'm trying to sweep. Go bother someone else."

"Huh? What kind of dummy actually likes cleaning?"

Suddenly, Houki grabbed one of the boys by his shirt. She may have only been in second grade, but she still trained every day. If it had turned into a real fight, she would have been more than a match for the three of them. Still, apart from that, she responded with only words, "What's dumb about taking things seriously? It's better than what you're doing, at least."

“What’re you so mad about? Lemme go!”

The two boys who weren’t grabbed broke out in nasty grins.

“I knew it! They really are a couple! They’ve been kissy-kissy all day!”

*Ugh, that again. Calling people a couple is their favorite insult. I’m sick of this.* Ever since Ichika had started to go to Houki’s dojo, the other boys wouldn’t shut up with that. Not that it really mattered to him. With no parents, he didn’t really even know what it meant.

“Totally. Maybe he’s why the tomboy started wearing a ribbon! Hahaha— Gwah!”

Ichika’s anger finally broke through to the surface, and he punched the boy clean across the nose. Ignoring the others, he yanked the boy back upright.

“What’s so funny? What are you laughing at? There’s nothing wrong with her wearing a ribbon! She looks great in it! Well?! What’s your problem, jerk?!”

“I’m telling the teacher!”

“Go ahead and do it! I’ll get you all before you can!”

Eventually, a teacher noticed the commotion and stopped the fight. Ichika, who’d learned martial arts from Chifuyu in addition to practicing kendo, was able to take on all three without a scratch. But this just made it worse for him. Snotty children usually had self-centered parents, and behind the three brats were three adults threatening to go to the police, or even sue. Ichika didn’t care, but he did care that Chifuyu ended up having to go apologize to each of them.

*If I cause trouble, Chifuyu will be stuck dealing with it.* Ichika learned his lesson about dealing with the brats using peaceful methods.

“You’re an idiot.”

“Me? What about you?”

Several days later, while Ichika was washing his face after after-school practice, Houki struck up a conversation.

“Weren’t you thinking about what would happen after you did that?”

“Huh? Oh, then? Nope, not at all. They needed a punching.”

Even though Chifuyu had scolded him harshly, it didn’t change his mind. That was one thing young Ichika was firm on.

“They were ganging up on you. I hate that. You don’t gang up on people, that’s not right.”

“.....”

“So I don’t mind. Plus, that ribbon really did look good on you. You should keep wearing it.”

“Hmph. I don’t need to be told how to dress.”

Houki crossed her arms and turned away, and Ichika muttered ‘oh well’ while he went back to washing his face. The coolness of the fresh water from the well wiping away his sweat was one of his favorite things.

“I’m heading home now. See you later, Shinonono.”

“Ho— Houki...”

“Huh?”

“My name is Houki. Remember it. My dad’s Shinonono. My mom’s Shinonono. My sister’s Shinonono. It’s too confusing. Call me Houki, okay?”

“Sure. I guess it’s the same for me, too. You can call me Ichika.”

“Wh-What?!”

“It’s my name. There are two Orimuras, but I’m the only Ichika!”

“O-Okay...”

“Okay, Houki!”

“Yeah, sure, fine! I-I-Ichika! Are you happy now?”

“Perfect. If you need me for something, just say that, don’t point at me.”

“Hmph!”

He watched Houki try to take the last word and storm off, thinking about how silly she was. It was June. The time for summer was near.



In a room at the resort, the clock on the wall pointed to just before four. Ichika had been out cold in bed for more than three hours. Houki had been waiting by his side the whole time. Her hair, drooping low without its usual ribbon, was a reflection of her emotions.

*It’s my fault...* Memories of Ichika smiling welled up within her, uninvited. But now, that smile was gone from his face. All he could do was lie there lifelessly. The scorching heat from the explosions had pierced his IS’ shields, then its armor, and now he was wrapped in bandages. *If I had taken things more seriously, this wouldn’t have happened to him!* She clutched her skirt until her fingers turned white from the pressure, as if she was admonishing herself. The more she thought, the harder her grip tightened.

“The mission was a failure. If the situation changes, you’ll be called for. Until then, remain on alert.”

That was the debriefing waiting for Houki after she was pulled from the sea and returned to the resort. After ordering that Ichika be given first aid, Chifuyu returned to the briefing room. The lack of a scolding made Houki even more miserable. *Why... Why do I always...*

As soon as she grasped power, she let it go to her head. The desire was too strong. There was always a moment when bloodthirst took over. *What have I been training for?* For Houki, fencing had always been not just an exercise, but a discipline—it was a limiter. A way to control her own bloodthirstiness.

She knew it was a dangerous line, though. Like thin ice on a stream, the slightest pressure would cause it to break. *I... I'm done with* — Just as Houki was about to make a crucial decision, the door suddenly slammed open. The bang shocked her, but she couldn't even gather up the energy to turn and see who entered.

"Knew you'd be here."

The girl who barged in walked up next to Houki, slouched in her chair. The voice was... Ling's.

"....."

"Listen."

Houki didn't respond. She couldn't respond.

"You think Ichika's like this because of you, don't you?"

The IS' defensive systems held Ichika in an induced coma. It had burned almost all its energy to save his life, placing him directly on life support. So until it regained energy, he wouldn't awaken.

"....."

"Is that why you're slouched over like that? Gimme a break!" Ling's rage boiled over, and she yanked Houki to her feet by her collar. "You have responsibilities! Why aren't you out there fighting?!"

"I... I can't... I can't pilot an IS anymore..."

"YOU—"

**Smack!** The slap on the cheek, along with the removal of support, sent Houki sprawling to the floor. Again, Ling pulled Houki up.

"You spoiled little brat! You have your own IS! We can't afford to have you moping around like this! Or are you just—" For a moment, Ling's eyes met Houki's. They burned with determination like they might burn with rage. "Are you just too much of a coward to fight when you need to?"

Her words sparked the same determination welling up in Houki's eyes.

"What..." The soft mumble only lasted a word before it turned into an angered shout. "WHAT DO YOU EXPECT ME TO DO?! We don't even know where the enemy is! If there's a fight, I'll fight it, but —"

Rin let out a quiet sigh as she watched Houki's determination return.

"That's a lot more like you. Ugh... I hated having to do that."

"What?!"

"We know where it is. Laura will—" As she spoke, the door



opened again. Standing there was Laura, in a jet-black uniform.

"We've found it. Thirty clicks away, over the open ocean. It's in stealth mode, but it doesn't appear to have optical cloaking. A satellite was able to pick it out."

As Laura stepped into the room, holding a digital reader in one hand, Ling was visibly impressed.

"So this is what German special forces are capable of. Not bad."

"Hmph. And what about you? Are you ready?"

"Of course. Shenlong's assault package is installed and ready. What about Charlotte and Cecilia?"

"They..."

Laura turned toward the door, and seconds later, it opened.

"Finished a moment ago."

"All systems online. We're ready to go."

The squad of pilots with personal IS had gathered, and turned their collective gaze onto Houki.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I-I'm..." Houki's hands clutched tight. Not with regret, but with determination. "I'm going to fight, and I'm going to win! This time, I won't lose!"

"It's decided, then." Rin crossed her arms, and cracked a fearless smile.

"Very well! Let's head to the briefing room. This time we'll take it down!"

"Yeah!"



### ***Whoosh, fshoosh.***

*Where am I?* Led along by the sound of the sea, I walked alone on an unfamiliar beach. With every step I took, sand crunched under my feet. I could feel its heat on my soles. The air was redolent with the smell of saltwater. The breeze was cool, and the sun was warm. *Is this summer? Is it summer now?* I didn't know where I was, or when it was. Just that, for some reason, I was walking along a beach barefoot in my uniform. I carried my shoes in my hand.

"Hmm~ Hmm-hmmmm~♪"

There was a singing voice. A beautiful and vibrant one. My curiosity piqued, I walked toward it.

***Tip, tap.***

***Tip, tap, tip.***

With every step, the sand ground beneath my feet.

"La-la~ Lalala~♪"

In front of me was a girl. She sang and danced at the water's edge, only her toes dampened slightly by the waves. As she did, her pale

white hair swayed. Not a dull white, but a dazzling shine. Her skirt, the same color, swayed and billowed in the sea breeze as she danced.

*Hmm...* For some reason, rather than thinking to call out to her, I simply rested my hips on a driftwood log. It must have washed up long ago, as its bark was stripped and its wood was bleached. As I sat on my warped white sofa, I watched the girl blankly. The rushing of the waves echoed in my ears. Soothed by the gentle breeze, I simply watched, languidly.



“.....”

200 meters above sea level. Silverio Gospel hung silently, curled into a fetal position. As it hugged its knees, its wings curled around it as if it was shielding itself.

[—?]

Reflexively, it raised its face. An instant later, a supersonic bullet struck its head and exploded.

“Direct hit. Commencing bombardment!”

Five kilometers away, the IS Schwarzer Regen and Laura floated, firing more shots before the Gospel could begin its counterattack. Unlike its normal loadout, it now mounted an .80-caliber ‘Blitz’ railgun on each shoulder. Four added shields, each guarding its front and sides, completed its adaption to bombardment and sniping. This was the Schwarzer Regen’s ‘Panzer Kanonier’ package.

*Enemy closing... 4,000... 3,000... Ugh! It’s faster than I expected!* In the blink of an eye, Silverio Gospel had closed range to 1,000 meters. Even as Laura had continued firing, the energy bullets from its wings had intercepted over half of Laura’s shots.

“Tch!”

A focus on dampening recoil was hard to couple with mobility. Meanwhile, the mobility-focused ‘Gospel’ had closed to within 300 meters, and then extended its right hand toward Laura. There was no time to escape. Still though, Laura’s mouth twisted into a grin.

“Cecilia!”

Fire crashed into the extended arms as an IS dove from above. The pure-blue IS Blue Tears made a full-force assault from stealth mode. Its six bits, unlike its standard loadout, were folded into a skirt around its waist. While this blocked their barrels, it made them usable as thrusters.

The BT laser rifle ‘Stardust Shooter’ which it cradled in its arms, a full two meters in length, made up for the firepower lost by repurposing the bits. Cecilia, equipped with the high mobility assault package ‘Strike Gunner,’ wore ‘Brilliant Clearance,’ a visor-style ultra-high-performance hypersensor designed to enhance her senses for

battle at over 500 kilometers per hour, over her face. Sensing the information it fed her, she suddenly flipped around and aimed for the Gospel itself.

*[Target B confirmed. Proceeding to eliminate.]*

“Too slow!” As the Gospel evaded Cecilia’s fire, another IS attacked it directly from the rear. It was Charlotte, who’d been riding on Cecilia’s back in stealth mode. Blasts from her akimbo shotguns smashed into the Gospel’s back, sending it sprawling. But only a moment later, it began to counterattack the three IS with its Silver Bell. “Sorry, but you’re not punching through my ‘Garden Curtain’ that easily!”

The Revive’s defensive package boasted combined energy and physical shields, off which the Gospel’s fire rolled like rain. Even though it looked like a normal Revive, pairs of both types of shield covered its front like a curtain. Even while defending, Charlotte used her Rabbit Switch to equip an assault cannon and squeeze off shots when there was an opening. Meanwhile, Cecilia darted around the Gospel firing, while Laura kept up the bombardment from afar. The Gospel quickly began to show damage from the three-pronged assault.

*[Change in mission priority— Prioritizing withdrawal from combat zone.]*

Firing shots in all directions, it readied a breakthrough charge.

“Can’t let you do that!”

The waves rose up, and then the surface of the sea exploded. The crimson Akatsubaki rocketed forth, with Shenlong perched on its back.

“We’ll take you down before you can escape!”

Akatsubaki dove toward the Gospel. Rin, who had leapt from its back, shifted her FAST pack ‘Bengshan’ into combat mode. The impact cannon emplacements on her shoulders opened, revealing two barrels in each. All four burst forth in flame.

*[—!]*

Houki dove away from close combat as a hail of fire swept from behind her. Rather than the usual invisible bullets, each was wrapped in a red flame. The torrent of bullets was enough to even blot out the Gospel’s fire. Such was the power of the enhanced impact cannon—no, the thermokinetic dispersion impact cannon.

“Did that get it?”

“Not yet!”

Even as it took a direct blast from the dispersion impact cannon, the Gospel continued.

*[Silver Bell maximum power... Activated.]* Spreading its arms as if to embrace the whole world, it threw its wings outward as well. In an instant, the battlefield was bathed in an unearthly glow, as waves of

fire spread in all directions.

“Tch!”

“Houki! Get behind me!”

After her failure on the earlier sortie, Houki’s Akatsubaki was in ‘limited mode.’ To prevent draining its energy by overuse of the variable-sweep armor, it was configured to not function automatically even in defensive mode. Of course, the only reason this was done was because Charlotte could handle defense. Each member of the squad was contributing what they were best at, to take advantage of their varied roles.

“This still isn’t exactly a walk in the park, though,” said Charlotte. Even with a defensive package equipped, she wouldn’t be able to hold out forever against the Gospel’s relentless fire. One of her physical shields had already been completely destroyed. “Laura! Cecilia! Your turn!”

“Why, you don’t even need to ask!”

“Leave it to us!”

As Charlotte fell back, Laura and Cecilia swooped in from the sides, firing. Cecilia used her speed to make a series of precise shots at its openings, while Laura kept up the blistering rate of fire her artillery package allowed.

“Once they pin you down, you’re mine!”



Meanwhile, Ling rose up from below. After a slash with the Souten Gagetso, she let loose a close-range deluge of fire from the dispersion impact cannon. Her target was the Silver Bell multithruster attached to the Gospel's head.

"Got you!" Even as energy bullets raked over her, Ling kept carving away. Her own impact cannon fire was inflicting just as much critical damage on its own, and soon, she managed to slice off one of the Gospel's wings. "Ha— How... How about— Ugh!"

Even with only one wing, the Gospel sprang back upright and spun around, kicking at Ling's left arm. Accelerated by its leg thrusters, the kick crushed through Ling's armor and sent her spiraling down toward the sea.

"Ling— Damn you!"

Houki hefted a katana in each hand and made a diving slash at the Gospel. Taking advantage of its lost balance from its sudden acceleration, she plunged toward its exposed right shoulder. *Got it!* At the same moment as she thought she'd grasped victory, though, unbelievably, the Gospel turned and caught each blade in one palm.

"What?!" Even as the blades' energy melted through its armor, the Gospel again spread its arms wide. Houki, still gripping them, felt her arms pulled apart too as her front was exposed. And then the remaining wing trained its barrels on her.

"Houki! Drop your weapons and get out of there!"

But Houki couldn't loosen her grip. *If I give up here, what have I been fighting for?* As the energy bullets charged, a glowing light shined from the wing, and then it erupted in fire. *What do I have strength for?* Just before the bullets struck, Akatsubaki quickly spun away. Its toetips, as if responding to her will, sprung blades of pure energy.

"There!"

As if delivering an axe kick, the blades raked across the Gospel. The Gospel, finally bereft of its wings, fell toward the sea.

"Haa... Haa..."

"Are you okay?!"

Houki calmed her ragged breathing as she heard a rare sign of concern from Laura.

"I... I'm fine. What about the Gos—"

Just as someone answered 'we won,' a sphere of light burst forth from the sea.

".....?!"

A round cavity in the surface formed around it, as if the flow of time had stopped. Inside, the Silverio Gospel, racked with blue lightning, floated as if embracing itself.

"What?! What on earth is happening?"

“Oh no! This is its second shift!” The second Laura shouted it out, the Gospel turned its face toward her, as if responding. The mechanical visor covering its pilot’s face hid her expression, but it was obviously malevolent, as each IS’ warning buzzers sounded off in a cacophony. However—it was too late.

**[GRAAAAAAAAAAGH!]** With a shout like the roar of a beast, the Gospel rocketed toward Laura.

“What?!”

Its speed was too fast to evade, and it grabbed Laura by the legs. Like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis, two wings of raw energy began to sprout slowly, but steadily, from its cut off head.

“Let go of Laura!”

Charlotte quickly switched over to a blade and thrust in. But, effortlessly, with its free hand, the Gospel pushed the blade aside.

“Get away! Run away! It’s going to—”

Laura’s sentence was cut off as the blinding beauty of the wing wrapped around her. A moment later, its hail of energy fired from point-blank range, and she fell, crumpled, down to the sea.

“LAURA! Dammit!”

Throwing away her blade, Charlotte swapped to a shotgun. Placing the mouth of its barrel to the Gospel’s forehead, she pulled the trigger. **BANG!** But the sound that ran was not of the shotgun firing. Suddenly cracks began to form across Gospel. On its chest, its torso, and its back, it was as if it was an eggshell hatching. Through the cracks small wings of light emitted from within. Their fire blew Charlotte’s shotgun away before pelting her.

“What’s going on?! This is just too much, even for a military—”

Cecilia set her eyes on the Gospel, preparing for another attack. With ‘Ignition Boost,’ thrusters on each of the Gospel’s arms and legs roared.

“Ugh!”

A long-range gun was a liability in a close-in fight. Even as Cecilia swung its barrel to bear, the Gospel kicked it away. And in the next blink of the eye, its wings erupted again. Cecilia sunk into the ocean, unable to even mount a counterattack.

“I won’t let you do that to my friends!” Houki suddenly accelerated in. Using her variable-sweep armor, she acrobatically evaded each counter, boosting at each turn to slash without regaining her footing. “HIIIIIRAH!”

A dance of dodges and pressed attacks unfolded in midair. As Akatsubaki sped up, slowly but surely, it put the Gospel on the back foot. *I can do this! I just need to keep going!* Houki put her all into a sudden checked swing to the head. But— **Fshhrrr.**

“What?! I’m out of ener— GAH!”

Seizing the opportunity, the Gospel caught Houki by the neck. Slowly, its wings wrapped around her.

*I'm sorry, Ichika...*



Waves crashed. I listened to them as I watched her. Somehow her singing, her dancing, reminded me so, so much of home.

*Huh...?* I noticed that her song had quieted. As her steps stilled too, the girl stared up at the sky. Wondering why, I stood up from my log and walked to her side. As the waves crashed and washed over the beach, their cooling water moistened my feet as I stepped to the water's edge.

"What's wrong?"

Even though I called out to her, the girl kept still, motionless, staring at the sky. When I looked up too, she finally spoke, "They're calling. It's time to get going."

"Eh?"

I looked back to my side, and she wasn't there. *What the...* Casting my eyes from side to side, I saw not a sign of human life. Nor could I hear her song. There was nothing more than the sound of the waves.

"Hmm..."

With nothing else to do, I turned to return to the makeshift sofa. And then, from behind me came a voice, "Do you desire strength?"

"Eh?" I spun around, and amidst the waves stood a woman—the water lapping up to her knees. Her body was encased in sparkling white armor, like that of a knight. A great sword was planted in the ground before her, and upon it she rested both hands. Armor covered her eyes, and I could see only the bottom half of her face.

"Do you desire strength? And why?"

"Strength? Well... That's a tough question."

The endless flow of the waves continued, it was the only thing that stood between us.

"I... I have an answer, though. To protect my friends—my comrades."

"Your comrades?"

"My comrades... How should I say it... There are things in this world worth fighting for, right? Not just for the sake of fighting. For goals."

Even though I didn't even have my own thoughts about it sorted out, I was able to give her a clear answer. As I listened to myself speak, I was sometimes surprised at what I really thought.

"And sometimes, when you pursue those goals, what happens doesn't make sense. There's a lot of pointless violence. And when that happens, I want to protect my comrades. The people I fight



alongside.”

“I see...” The woman quietly nodded.

“Then you need to get going.”

“Eh?”

Another voice came from behind me. I turned to see the girl in the skirt again. She gave a friendly smile, and gazed at me calmly.

“Ready?” As she grasped my hand, she broke out into a grin. Suddenly blushing, I nodded ‘yes.’ Immediately after, my surroundings changed.

“W-What’s going on?”

The sky—the whole world—began to glow brightly. As the white light enveloped me, the beach around me blurred. As if a dream was ending, it occurred to me. *Now that I think of it... That woman looked familiar. That white knight.*



“Guh... Ghrgh...”

A gasp of pain escaped Houki’s throat through the choke hold. The Gospel’s hand gripped tighter around her neck, and a Silver Bell of pure energy wrapped around the Akatsubaki. *Is this it? I can’t believe it would end like this...* The wing’s glow grew more intense. As she counted down to it firing, a single thought floated through her mind.

—*I want to be with him—*

—*I want to be with Ichika—*

—*Right now, I want to be with him—*

—*Ah, to be by his side—*

“Ichi... ka...”

Unconsciously, his name passed her lips.

“Ichika...”

As the glow intensified, she made her final peace.

***Fshooom!***

[—?!]

Suddenly, the Gospel’s grasp on her loosened. Confused, Houki opened her eyes, only to see a particle cannon burst blast it away. *What just happened?* The voice she’d longed for rang like a bell through her confusion.

**“I won’t let you lay a hand on any of my comrades!”**

Just before Houki’s eyes, a white IS glimmered with light.

“A-Ahh...” Tears welled up in her eyes. Hovering in her clouded vision was Byakushiki’s second shift, Setsura—and Ichika.





“Ichika! Ichika, is that you? How? You were so badly burnt—”  
I made my way to Houki’s side as she struggled to control her voice.

“Yeah. Sorry I took so long.”

“I... I’m so happy...”

“Were you crying?”

“I most certainly was not!”

I gently patted Houki’s head as she dabbed tears from the corners of her eyes.

“Don’t worry. It’s okay now.”

“I wasn’t worried...”

Trying to show she was still in control. That was definitely Houki. As I patted her head, I noticed she wasn’t wearing a ponytail.

“Good timing. Here, have this.”

“Eh...?”

I passed what I was carrying to Houki.

“A... ribbon?”

“Happy birthday.”

“Ah...”

It was July 7th. Today was Houki’s birthday. I hadn’t been sure what to get her, so I’d asked Charl to help me pick something out.

“Go ahead. Put it on.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“All right, here I go. This isn’t over yet.” As I spoke, I dashed toward the incoming Silverio Gospel. “Time for a rematch!”

I brandished the Yukihiro Nigata in my right hand, and slashed. As it grazed over the IS, I followed up with the new weapon in my left hand—Setsura. It appeared when Byakushiki changed to second shift, and could seemingly adapt to any tactical condition. It seemed to share the same name as the second shift, too. This time, I envisioned an energy claw springing from my fingertips.

“You can’t dodge this!”

A claw more than a meter long sliced through the IS’ armor. Even though it was dissipated by its shield, it was a clean hit.

[Updating data on enemy IS. Engaging with attack level A.] Silverio Gospel spread its energy wings, and the wings growing from its body snapped taut. After evading, it returned strafing fire.

“How many times do you think you’re getting away with that?!”

Rather than dodging, I raised my left hand before myself and switched the Setsura to shield mode. It would absorb the bullets. With a ringing noise, the Setsura changed form. A barrier of light spread

out, and the rain of fire from Silverio Gospel had vanished. It was an energy canceler, like the Reiraku Byakuya, but as a shield. It may have had a high cost in energy, but being able to completely cancel the enemy's attacks gave me the advantage. I'd looked over the datasheets earlier, and they only had energy weapons.

“RAAAGH!”

Byakushiki Setsura's four gigantic wing thrusters roared to life, as I activated Double Ignition. Even the nimble Gospel couldn't evade, and I closed in fast.

*[Change of tactical situation. Using maximum attack power.]*

As Silverio Gospel's artificial voice announced its next tactic, its extended wings folded in to wrap around its body. They formed into a sphere, and encased itself in a cocoon of energy. *Oh no. I have a bad feeling about this.* And I was right.

The wings spun around, opening again, and filled the air around it with a storm of bullets. An attack which would hit Rin and the others, who were still recovering. *Ugh! Can I protect them?!* I dove in front of them to take the blow, only to be kicked away.

“What are you doing?! We may be wounded, but we're still National Cadets! Don't worry about us! Take down the enemy!”

“Rin... Okay!”

I had to believe in them. There was no other choice. No matter what, I had to just believe. With Yukihiro in my right hand and Setsura in my left, I brought forth the shining blade of Reiraku Byakuya from each, and charged back toward my enemy.



*Ichika! He came!* Her heart fluttered. Her passion leapt forth. And seeing him fight, she wished, more than anything. *I want to fight alongside him. I want to protect him!* Wished with all her heart. As if to answer her prayer, sparks of gold blended with the red light of her variable-sweep armor.

“Is this—”

As the stream of data from her hypersensor entered her mind, she could sense energy suddenly flow back into Akatsubaki.

***[KENRAN BUTOU ACTIVATED. DAZZLING DANCE. ENERGY BYPASS TO VARIABLE-SHIFT ARMOR: COMPLETE.]***

An indicator reading ‘One-Off Ability’ floated before her eyes. *I can still fight? Then—* Tightening the ribbon she'd received from Ichika, Houki looked at the Gospel and steeled her will. *Here we go! Akatsubaki!* A crimson streak trailed golden stardust as it sliced across the evening sky, backlit by the setting sun.



“I’ve got you now!” The glowing blades of Reiraku Byakuya cleaved through the Silverio Gospel’s energy wing. Landing a follow-up strike, though, was near-impossible, and my second slash went wide. As I followed through, its lost wing regrew, and coiled for another impossibly-fierce barrage. “Ugh!”

*[REMAINING ENERGY: 20%. ESTIMATED OPERATIONAL TIME REMAINING: 3 MINUTES.]*

*Shit! I’m not going to be able to—* I had no clue how much energy a military IS without a limiter had available. Meanwhile, my own was operating at its limits. A sense of unease began to eat at me.

“Ichika!”

“Houki?! But, you took so much damage—”

“Don’t worry about me! Take this!” Houki’s—Akatsubaki’s—hand stretched forth and rested on Byakushiki. At the same moment, a feeling halfway between an electric shock and a burning sensation spread over me, and my vision wavered.

“W-What’s going on? My energy... Is refilling?! Houki, what did you just—”

“Don’t worry about that right now! Just go for it, Ichika!”

“Yeah!”

Focusing again, I raised Yukihiro Nigata to its maximum power. A massive blade of pure energy sprung forth from my grasped hands.

“HIIRAAAAAARGH!”

Silverio Gospel ducked to the side to evade my sideways slash, and as it reentered my sight I saw its wing of light begin to curl around me. *This is our chance!*

“Houki!”

“Got it!” Houki’s twin blades cut a double slash through the wing as it thrust forward. “You’re not getting away!”

The variable-sweep armor on her legs opened up as it drove a fierce kick to the Gospel’s body. As it staggered under the unexpected assault, I slashed back upward, cutting through the remaining wing. Finally, with a thrust forward, I sheered the smaller wings from its body.

*No turning back now!* Bathed in a hail of fire, I thrust Reiraku Byakuya’s blade into the IS’ chest with a roar. As I felt the energy blade make contact, I pushed my thrusters to their limit. Even as I cut through Silverio Gospel, its hand reached toward me. Only as its fingers began to wrap around my neck did the silver IS finally shut down. I panted for breath as the pilot, now armorless and clad only in an IS suit, fell toward the sea.

“Oh no—”

“Jeez, you’re so sloppy.”

Rin had finally recovered from her damage, and scooped her out

of the air just before she splashed down. It looked like Charl and Laura were fine too, even if they weren't exactly unscathed.

"It's over."

"Yeah... Finally."

Side by side with Houki, I gazed up at the sky. The sky, which was so blue earlier, was fading to the warm, dusky vermilion of twilight.



"Mission successful... Is what I'd like to say, but your insubordination is a major problem. When we get back to the academy, be ready for a formal written apology and some special corrective training."

"Understood..."

A chilly welcome for the returning warriors. The thrill of victory had faded like mist before Chifuyu's cold reproach. Now, we knelt in the banquet hall. The wait had already been thirty minutes. Cecilia's face had faded from a bright red to a sickly *wan* hue, as if signaling oncoming danger.

"Er, Ms. Orimura. Isn't this enough by now? They're injured..."

"Hmph."

Chifuyu's anger was matched by Ms. Yamada's concern. She'd been busy assembling first aid kits and rehydration packs.

"Take a quick rest, and then we'll need to get you checked out. This will be a full-body exam, so undress first. Ah— Wait! Boys and girls will be examined separately! Understood, Orimura?"

Well, of course. That was practically a given. Anyway, the moment she said 'undress,' the girls all subconsciously covered up. It stung. Did they think I was the kind of guy to start leering?

"First off, though, make sure you rehydrate. If you don't pay attention to that kind of thing in the summertime, it can catch up with you fast."

A quick agreement, and we passed the sports drinks around. They were lukewarm, of course. It wouldn't have been healthy to just chug something cold.

"Oww... Wow, I think I have a cut in my mouth."

A metallic taste filled my mouth, which I thought to be blood. I may have bitten myself without noticing during the fight. It looked like I'd be skipping the wasabi in my soy sauce at dinner tonight. That would be hell on earth.

"....."

"Is there something else, Ms. Orimura?"

She had been glaring in our direction for a while, and I was unsettled enough to speak up. Ugh, no, that was probably just going to make her angrier.

“Honestly, that was good work out there... I’m glad you all made it back safely.”

“Eh? Uh...”

A hint of embarrassment flitted over her face before she turned around and it disappeared from our sight. Having seen her worry about us, I silently thanked her. If I had spoken it aloud, I’m sure she would have been displeased.

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

Huh? Why were all the girls looking—no, glaring at me?

“Er, Orimura? It’s time for everyone’s checkup, so, um—”

**“GET OUT OF HERE!”**

Five angry shouts chased me into the hallway. Leaning against the sliding door which slammed shut, I let out a deep sigh.

“Phew...”

For now, the battle was over. I had plenty to think about, and plenty to go over, but for now... *I protected my comrades. I did it.* Me and Byakushiki.



“So, what happened up there? C’mon, tell me!”

“I can’t. It’s classified.”

Across from me, Charl was happily munching on her dinner as several of the first year students interrogated her. I supposed they had gone after her as she seemed the easiest to strike up a conversation with, but that was a poor decision. Charl was easily the one among us with the strongest sense of responsibility.

“Jeez. You’re like talking to a brick wall.”

“Well, I could tell you, but then I’d have to... *You know.* Are you sure you want that?”

“Well... That doesn’t sound that great...”

“Okay, then this conversation is over. I’m not telling you anything else.”

The first years grumbled audibly at her statement. She really handled that well. Fending off our classmates was no effort at all. Sometimes, I feel like Charl’s the real big sister in this story.

“Hm? Is something up?”

Charl noticed my gaze and asked why. I didn’t really have a reason, but I felt like it would seem weird to just say “oh, nothing,” so...

“Charlotte, your yukata’s coming open on top.” The girl beside her

whispered something in her ear. I had a really bad feeling about this. And lately I'd been right on the money regarding bad feelings about girls.

"Wha—"

As expected, Charl blushed a bright red and nervously clutched a hand to the placket of her yukata. And, hmm? What was that look of absolute defiance?

"Ichika, you pervert..."

"What?!"

Why the sudden wrongful prosecution? Why? Well? Huh?

"I was kidding... You're fine."

".....!"

Again, the girl next to her whispered something. As soon as she heard it, Charl's ears flushed bright red as she stood up. What was going on?!

"....."

"Wow, this sashimi sure is good. Ahahahah."

Charl's defiant glare shifted from me to the girl next to her, who continued eating as if she didn't notice.

"You have a really dirty mind, Charlotte."

"What? No way! I just..."

This time Charl was on the receiving end of the teasing. Yeah, I had no clue where this conversation was going.

"Ichika? Uh, sorry about that..."

"Huh? Oh, it's fine."

I wasn't sure, so I gave an honest answer. Well done. Charl sat back down with a thump, and after a quick grin, reached over and pinched the girl's side. *Weird, she seems angry for some reason.* Whatever. I had bigger things to worry about, like who was next to me.

"....."

**Chew, chew, chew, chew...** Houki, her hair back up in a ponytail, had kept her chopsticks moving the whole meal. I almost felt like she didn't want to talk to me, and that's why she just kept eating. Was I overthinking it?

"Ah... Houki?"

Suddenly the chewing came to a stop.

"Um, are you okay? You're not hurt or anything, right?"

**Gulp.** Houki breathed out quickly, nodded, then continued on chewing. Well, then.

"Hey, Houki."

She shuddered in surprise. After a pause she set her chopsticks down and turned toward me. The motion was so awkward that anyone else would probably have been able to tell that something was



up, too.

“W-What?”

“Oh, something about you just seemed a bit off.”

“Off? Are you sure?”

Ugh, I really tripped over myself there. Why was she being so polite? No, really, it was weird. Houki has been way too quiet since the end of that fight. I couldn’t even say ‘quiet as a mouse,’ since at least they’d squeak in surprise. I’d been beginning to learn lately from how people reacted to me that girls really didn’t like it when you pointed out that they were doing something weird. It didn’t really make sense... But it was definitely happening, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Um. Honestly, never mind.”

“Uh... Ahh. Sure.”

It really felt like I put that the wrong way. I could see Houki’s shoulders slump as she returned to eating, albeit at a much slower pace. *I’m sorry, Houki...*

“.....”

“.....”

Houki and I finished our meals without really saying anything more. Honestly, even though it was probably extremely tasty, I barely even remember it.



***Whooosh, crash.***

“Phew...”

I gave myself a few taps on the head as I got out of the water. Shaking my head from side to side to clear the water from my ears, I then sat down on a nearby rock.

After a short rest, I’d left the resort for a nighttime swim. A full moon left the world around me bright, even late into the night. The calm sound of the ocean filled my ears as I gazed up at it. *You know, I feel like I had a dream this afternoon... I wonder what it was about?* I felt like I remembered it clearly when I woke up, but now I couldn’t even pin down what it was about. That may just be how dreams were, but it felt like it was something very important, and forgetting left me feeling troubled.

“I-Ichika?”

Hearing my name suddenly called out, I turned around. Standing in the moonlight was Houki in a swimsuit.

“Houki? Now that I think of it, I didn’t see you yesterday—”

“Don’t stare like that... It’s making me nervous...”

“Sorry.”

I quickly turned back around. Even though I only saw her

swimsuit for a few seconds, it was burned into my mind. It was white. A white bikini, which was rare for Houki—or at least the kind of thing I would never have imagined her wearing. There were black lines around the hems, and the cut left little to the imagination—it was, maybe... Sexy? Yeah, sexy. *Wow, this is awkward.* I tried to figure out a way to take my mind off it, but I didn't have much luck. Even though there was a space of around a meter between us, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

“.....”

“.....”

“Errrr... You know...”

“Yeah...”

Forcing myself to ignore my pounding heart at all costs, I hunted for something to make small talk about. But what came out of my mouth next was anything but.

“That swimsuit looks great on you... I think it's fine.”

“Ah—”

I could tell that Houki was shying away. As I stole a peek at her face, I saw it glow red.

“Oh, this? I, uh... I got ahead of myself when I went shopping... I made myself put it on, but it's just so embarrassing...”

It seemed like that was why I didn't see her during the free time on the first day. Anyway, apparently she found it embarrassing to look at me while we talked, so I turned so we could be facing apart. The moon, hanging between us, lit us like day.

“Hey, Houki...”

“W-What... is it?”

“Why are you being so formal today? You can just talk like normal, it's fine.”

“Mm...”

I'd wanted to ask her that since dinner. She sat silent for a moment, then answered slowly in spurts, as if she had a hard time putting it in words.

“You... You said... You preferred modest women...”

Ugh, so I did. Was that what she was worried about?

“Well, um. I think you're fine just the way you are. You don't have to change yourself for me, okay?”

“O-Okay...” It was a bit stiff, but after she cleared her throat again, Houki's reluctance faded. “Like this?”

“Yeah. That's the Houki I know. By the way, how's your hair? Did it get burnt?”

“Y-Yeah, a little. Not badly, though. The ribbon took most of it. And... I mean, I have a new ribbon now, so...”

“Sure. Happy birthday, again.”

“Well... Th... Thanks...”

She finished so quietly that I couldn’t actually hear it, but I could tell what she meant. And, yeah—Houki looked best with a ponytail.

“Er... Um.

How about you? Are you okay? You seemed hurt pretty badly.”

“Me? Oh, I got better.”

“What?”

“Uhh, when I woke up, I was already in my IS, fully-healed.”

“Are you kidding?! That’s impossible!” Houki grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me into the moonlight. “Your burns... They’re gone... Are you really all better?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. You know what it probably was? The IS’ life support system.”

“That just keeps you alive. I’ve never heard of it healing wounds.”

Tentatively, Houki ran her hands over my back, to feel with her own fingertips that it was unscarred. I heard her murmur “I can’t believe it” to herself, and couldn’t understand why.

“I’m all better now, so no big deal, right?”

“It is a big deal! I... I got you hurt like that, and still...”

“Would you rather I wasn’t better?”

“NO!” She only realized how loudly she spoke after it was out of her mouth. “No, no, it’s not like that at all... I just... I just don’t know how to deal with you being okay with it...”

She sounded almost disappointed, and I didn’t know quite how to react. It seemed like she felt guilty for getting me hurt, and didn’t want to be forgiven just because I was fine now. Sometimes she was really hard to deal with. But if that was how she felt, then I had no choice... I was going to have to punish Houki.

“All right, I’ll punish you for it, then.”

“R-Right...”

Turning back to Houki, I looked closely at her face. Her eyes were squeezed tight, in preparation. *This girl, sometimes...* I flicked her forehead with a finger.

“Mm?!”

“That’s enough. You’ve learned your lesson about getting overconfident and going off on your own, right?”

“What?!” Houki blinked twice in bewilderment before closing in on me, her face bright red. “Are you just making fun of me?! All that, and you think it’s paid back by flicking my forehead?!”

“Calm down. Don’t get so excited.”

“Silence! I am a warrior! Expecting me to remain silent as my pride is sullied is—”

“Er... Could you back up a little? Something’s rubbing on me...”

My personal orbit had been invaded by two massive cannons.

“.....!!”

Houki, suddenly realizing how close she was, ducked back away from me. After gaining a bit of distance, she wrapped her arms around her breasts and gave me a glare of pure defiance. Oops.

“I can’t believe you! Someone’s trying to hold a serious conversation with you, and all you can think about—”

Well, it was true. Sorry. I’m sorry I was born a man.

“S-So... So maybe you do notice them...”

“Huh?”

“Okay, fine then!”

She grabbed my hand and stuffed it... straight into her cleavage.

*Umm... Houki?*

“So? Do you think of me as a woman or not?”

Houki’s voice had suddenly lost its insistence, and was almost entreating. Her embarrassed blush had extended up to her ears.

“Yeah...” There was nothing forcing me to say that, but I let it slip anyway. Surrounded by the sound of the waves, with my childhood friend in front of me in a sexy bikini, under the light of a full moon, it just felt right. And plus—how should I put it... I thought Houki was cute.

“Really... I see...”

Houki took her time chewing over the words before really digesting them. I could feel the heat of her body next to me. We were so close, I was worried she could hear the sound of my own heart pounding.

“.....”

Even the sound of it hammering in my chest was almost enough to break the spell. Suddenly, our gazes met. *Ah... I was mesmerized. Her face, lit by the moon, was beautiful. This is bad. Really bad... I think?* Even as I thought to myself, the sound of my heart filled—

“C-Cecilia?! What are you doing here?”

“I could say the same, Ling! I don’t even want to imagine what’s going to happen to you for sneaking out of the resort.”

“Okay, Ichika’s—”

“Laura? Rin and Cecilia? Why are you all here?!”

A different pang in my chest. Those voices were unmistakable. It was Rin, Cecilia, Laura, and Charl. From how loud their voices were, they couldn’t be far away. If we stayed where we were, they’d find us. Us. Alone. Together. I think I knew what was waiting for me when that happened.

“Houki, let’s go over there.”

“Eh? Wha—”

I grabbed her hand and pulled her away from the nearby voices,

towards an outcropping. There, we climbed up onto a rock. *Phew... Let's just hide out here for a while. If we head back when they leave, it should be fine.*

"Ichika... This is so sudden... Bringing me somewhere where we can be alone. I..."

"Huh?"

As Houki whispered to me, I turned my face toward her.

"Mm..."

*Eh?! W-W-What are you doing, Houki?! Why are your eyes closed? Why are you looking up at me with your lips curled like that?!*

"....."

Her face was truly beautiful as she waited. Oh no. How could I get myself out of this? *Dammit... I don't know if I can resist...* Houki shivered as I placed my hand on her shoulder. Then, as she leaned forward, our faces pulled together, and—

**Bonk.**

*Huh? What was that?* Leaning in again, I—

**Bonk.**

*Dammit, what does my forehead keep hitting?!* Curious, I opened my eyes. I shouldn't have. Waiting to say 'hi' was a floating object with fins. Its tip was punctuated by a rectangular slit.

"Blue... Tears..."

The bit's barrel poked at my forehead. **Whiiiiiiing.**

"Whoa!"

**Fshoom!** A BT laser scorched my hair as I ducked out of the way.

"Oh my."

"Now we kill him."

"Ichika, what were you doing?"

"Ahahaha, hahahahahahaha!"

As I finished my pivot, I was met with four piercing glares. In order, they were Laura, Rin, Charl, and Cecilia.

"Houki! Let's get out of here!"

"Eh? What? Eek!"

Even though she shrieked as I suddenly picked her up, I didn't have time to care. It was time to respect Hare Stance. We sped off, with the four others in hot pursuit. *Oh, right.* This happened a month ago too, didn't it? As I indulged myself with reminiscence, the sounds of gunfire drew closer. *Stop it, I'll die! I'll really die!*



"So including Kenran Butou, Akatsubaki operated at a total of forty-two percent of its capacity. Ah well, I guess that's all I could expect."

As she looked at the data on a floating display, an innocent grin

washed across the woman's face. Like a child. Like an angel. Like usual, even under the moonlight. Shinonono Tabane always had just a hint of boredom about her.

“Hmm, hmm-hmm.”

As she hummed to herself, she pulled up another display. On it was footage of Byakushiki's second shift in combat. She sat on the guardrail on an outcropping, swinging her feet back and forth as she watched. Three hundred meters below her, the sea spread out to the horizon. No matter how risky her perch, her expression remained unchanged.



“Wow. The Byakushiki’s incredible. Even healing its pilot? It’s almost like—”

“Like the White Knight, isn’t it. Core #001. The first to see combat. The one you poured your blood, sweat, and tears into.” Chifuyu silently stepped out of the woods. Still wearing her black suit, she carried all the quiet gravity of the midnight shadows she walked through.

“Hey, Chichan!”

“Hey.”

They didn’t turn toward each other. Facing apart, Tabane continued swaying, while Chifuyu leaned against a tree. Even though they couldn’t see each other’s faces, they knew what was written on them. Such was the bond between them.

“There’s one problem, though, Chichan. Where did the White Knight go?”

“You’ll find your answer if you read ‘Byakushiki’ as ‘White Form.’”

“Bingo. I knew you’d be familiar enough with the White Knight to tell.”

The White Knight had been dismantled except for its core, and its analysis had been a major driver in the production of first-generation IS. As for the core, after a certain laboratory was raided, it disappeared from history until eventually coming to reside in an IS called Byakushiki.

“And then, you know... Just as a guess, let’s assume that there was some communication over the core network between your first IS, the White Knight, and your second, the Kurezakura. If that happened, it wouldn’t be surprising at all if they ended up with the same one-off ability, would it?”

“.....”

Chifuyu didn’t answer. Tabane, though, paid no heed to her silence.

“Still, something’s a bit funny. That core was completely wiped before the White Knight was dismantled. I did it myself, so I know it got done properly.”

“Sometimes not everything has to make sense.”

Neither of them really knew. Not Chifuyu, not Tabane. But that didn’t stop Tabane.

“Actually... I think I’ll make a guess, too.”

“Really, Chichan? That’s unusual.”

“What if a certain genius happened to make sure a young boy went to the wrong entrance exam. And meanwhile, she had an IS there set up to operate automatically. If that happened, wouldn’t he be piloting an IS even though men couldn’t?”



“Hmm. I don’t think I have the attention span for that.”

“I suppose. You never did spend that much time on any given project.”

“You’re right. I get bored way too easily,” Tabane giggled.

“So, genius... How plausible does that sound?”

“I dunno. Honestly, I have no idea how to make the Byakushiki do anything. And Icky had nothing to do with IS previously, either.”

“Hmph... Whatever. Next idea.”

“You have a lot of those tonight.”

“And doesn’t that make you happy?”

“Sure does,” Tabane replied, as she continued to listen to Chifuyu.

“What if a certain genius wanted her dear little sister to have a moment in the sun. So she developed a personal IS, and arranged for another to go out of control.”

Tabane didn’t answer. Chifuyu continued.

“And then, just as the rampaging IS arrived, so too would that new high-powered IS appear on the scene. Just so her little sister could make a stunning debut.”

“That’s a funny thing to contemplate. It must be one incredible genius.”

“She really is. One time, she even hacked the strategic commands of twelve different countries to create an historic international incident.”

Again, Tabane didn’t answer. Chifuyu, too, soon fell silent.

“So, Chichan. Do you like how the world is now?”

“It could be worse.”

“I guess.”

The sea winds howled.

“\_\_\_\_\_”

Her whisper lost in the wind, Tabane vanished. Suddenly. Like a flash.

“.....” Chifuyu sighed and rubbed the back of her head on the tree. Whatever words escaped from her lips were, likewise, carried away on the gale.

## Epilogue: Your Name Is

The next morning, after breakfast, we packed up the IS and their gear. That lasted until after ten. Afterwards, we all boarded the buses, split up by homeroom. Lunch would be at a rest stop on the way back.

“Hah...”

As I slumped into my seat, I was, to put it bluntly, a mess. After almost an hour being chased around the night before, I caught the mother of all scoldings from Chifuyu for sneaking out. In the end, I got barely three hours of sleep. Waking up to heavy labor after that made me feel like I was going to die.

“Sorry, but does anyone have something I can drink?” I asked in an exhausted voice.

“Swallow your own spit,” said Laura.

“I don’t even know you,” said Cecilia.

“Yeah, but I’m not sharing,” said Charl.

Rin was in another homeroom, so she wasn’t here. I turned toward Houki, my last hope.

“Wh-Why are you looking at me?!”

Blushing, she hit me with a karate chop. Ow, that actually kinda hurt.

“Hmph!”

It looked like I wasn’t getting anything to drink. Was this my fault, too? Ugh...



*Maybe that was a bit too harsh.* Even though her words were harsh, Charlotte’s conscience began to get the better of her as she watched Ichika’s dejection.

*Nothing actually happened last night. I should just let it go.* She searched her things for a bottle of tea, thinking it was a good thing that she had the idea to buy it from a vending machine earlier. *No one else is going for it... Here’s my chance!*



*Perhaps that was a bit cold?* As Ichika’s shoulders slumped, Cecilia felt a bit nervous. It was a rare chance to be kind to him, but she’d let her memories of last night cloud her emotions. But seeing as all of the

other girls had done the same, she could still turn this around.

*If that's the case—* She slipped her hand into her bag, reaching for a bottle. She had gotten it for herself, but perhaps this was a better use. *Time to, ahem, make hay while the sun shines.*



*Maybe I should have found a different way to say that...* Laura, her self-doubt a product of the new step forward she'd taken on the beach the day before, pondered. She regretted so coldly fixating on what happened the previous night. Perhaps, she thought, a warm smile was the way for a good woman to clear things up.

*I know. He's thirsty. I'll give him the tea I bought this morning.* She fiddled with the bottle in her hands, wondering how to give it to him. It was rare for the other girls to hesitate like this. She shouldn't let the chance escape her. *I know. I'll just sit down next to him and hand it over. That way, we can be together the whole trip back.*



*Wow, I really messed up.* Last night had been going wonderfully, but ended up leading nowhere. Instead, she ended up so frustrated with Ichika as he pulled her around that she'd been in a bad mood all morning.

*Oh no. Am I getting in the habit of just snapping at him?* That wouldn't be good. It was bad enough two months ago, but now she had Charlotte to deal with, too. She'd forever be on the back foot against such a fierce rival if she was just written off as 'the violent one.' *All right! Now it's time to be kind!* Gripping the bottle of tea she bought while walking to the bus, Houki stood up.



"Ugh, my head..."

**"Ichika!"**

"Yes?" Hearing four voices at once, I turned. Just at the same time, an unfamiliar woman stepped onto the bus.

"Is Orimura Ichika here?"

"Yes. That's me."

Fortunately, I was sitting in the front row. As soon as I was called for, I replied.

The woman was around twenty. Definitely older than us, with vibrant blonde hair which shone like the summer sun. She was wearing a blue summer suit. Not a business cut like Chifuyu favored, but a more casual, more fashionable one. The swelling mounds unique

to adult women peeked out from its neckline. Tucking her sunglasses into her cleavage, she bent at the hip to turn toward me.

“Oh, so it’s you?”

She gazed at me intently. Not as if to criticize me, but seemingly more out of raw curiosity. Her perfume, a citrus smell, was so overwhelmingly feminine that I grew nervous.

“And you are?”

“Natasha Fairs. Pilot of Silverio Gospel.”

“Eh—”

As I was frozen in the confusion of such an unexpected line, she leaned in and planted her lips on my cheek.

“Hehe. That’s thanks for what you did yesterday. My white knight.”

“Eh? Uh, ah...”

“See you later! Bye-bye!”

“Uhh...”

Natasha waved as she got off the bus, and dazed, I waved back. Well, then...

“.....”

I had a really, really bad feeling as I turned around.

“You lecher!”

“You sure are popular, Ichika.”

“Fortune just greets him everywhere he goes.”

“Hahaha...”

The four stomped toward me. It echoed like the stomping of jackboots.

“**HERE, TAKE THIS!**” Four plastic bottles came flying. At half a liter each, that could have been deadly.



As Natasha got off the bus, she found someone else she was looking for, and walked toward her.

“Hey, cool it, there. He’s just a kid.”

It was Chifuyu. Natasha gritted her teeth in embarrassment.

“He was a lot better of a guy than I expected. I got carried away a little.”

“Ah, kids today... More importantly. Are you okay walking around like that after yesterday?”

“Yeah, I’m fine— That girl protected me.”

‘That girl’ was Silverio Gospel’s AI, which had triggered the situation by going out of control.

“So it was like that, eh?”

“Yeah. She took a fight she didn’t want to protect me. Forcing herself into second shift, cutting off the core network... She threw

away her whole world.” As Natasha spoke, every trace of her cheerfulness faded, replaced by a sharp bitterness. “I’m never going to forgive them. When I find who took away her mind, who turned the other IS against her... That person is going to get what they deserve.”

Although the Gospel’s core was unharmed, because of what happened, it had been ordered frozen before dawn that morning.

“She loved flying more than anything. And then they took her wings away... I don’t care who it was. I won’t forgive them.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard. There’s still the incident postmortem. You should see where that ends up.”

“Is that a formal warning, Brynhildr?”

Brynhildr. The title reserved for the champion of the international IS tournament called Mondo Grosso. Chifuyu was the first to receive it—and she hated being called by it.

“Just some friendly advice.”

“I see. I suppose I’ll stay quiet. For a little while.”

Parting with a quick, wordless glare, they went on their ways. Until next time. The words floated between them.

End of Volume Three.

# Afterword: Volume Three, a retrospective.

**IZUCHU! I choose you!**

It's Yumizuru again. Give me your energy!

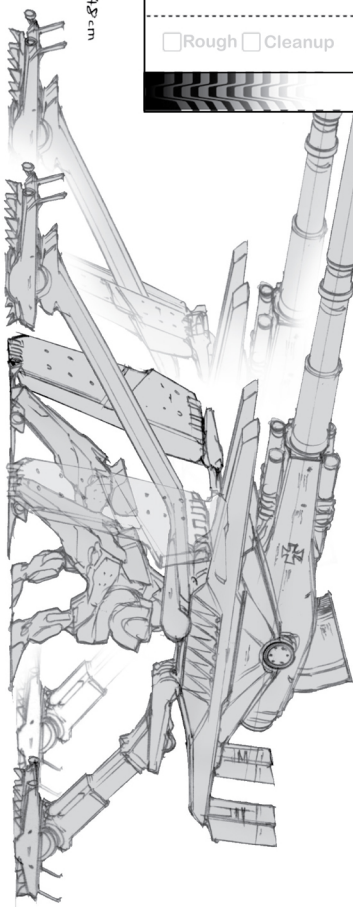
I wanted to make this volume about Houki's growth as a person and deepening bonds with her friends. I also wanted to give Ichika his second shift. Everyone grew in this volume, even if it was just a little bit. Mentally. Physically. And their IS.

CHOCO's art was great this time, too! Woohoo! It's the sea! And also robots! This volume has upgrade packs for everyone, but I remember being worried about how they'd appear. Oh, and since it was the beach volume, the use of swimsuits had me really worried as well. Would someone be lotioning someone else up? Or maybe they'd be splitting a watermelon. But when I saw CHOCO and Arima's design, I let out a gasp. It was amazing.

Anyway, see you next time in the next volume!

**IZUCHU, enough! Come back! Go! MANUSCRIPT!**

— Izuru Yumizuru



|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Subject</b><br><b>Celebration of<br/>Vol. 3 Release</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <b>Date</b><br>: 2013 / April,<br>but it's still cold               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rough <input type="checkbox"/> Cleanup <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Afterword</b>                                                                                                                                         | <b>Time</b><br>: An anime is being<br>announced at a castle ball... |
| <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> <b>CHOCO</b><br/> MUGITANI KOICHI </div> <div> <a href="http://chocolateshop-float.com">http://chocolateshop-float.com</a> </div> </div> |                                                                     |

Just around now, there's a dazzling party going on at a castle in Ikebukuro, where Yumizuru and some beautiful actresses are living it up as they announce Season 2 of the IS anime...

But I haven't missed my chance yet! Though, I really should have sent in my art earlier. You there! Are you my fairy godmother? Could that be a Season 2 cast list you're holding? Wonderful!

"And when I cast a spell on this pumpkin... Abra-cadabra!"  
\*poof\*

Wow, the pumpkin changed into the double-120 mm/80-rail-gun-equipped Schwarzer Regen Panzer Kanonier I designed but didn't draw for the illustrations!

Thanks, fairy godmother!

CHOCO

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Infinite Stratos: Volume 3

by Izuru Yumizuru

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